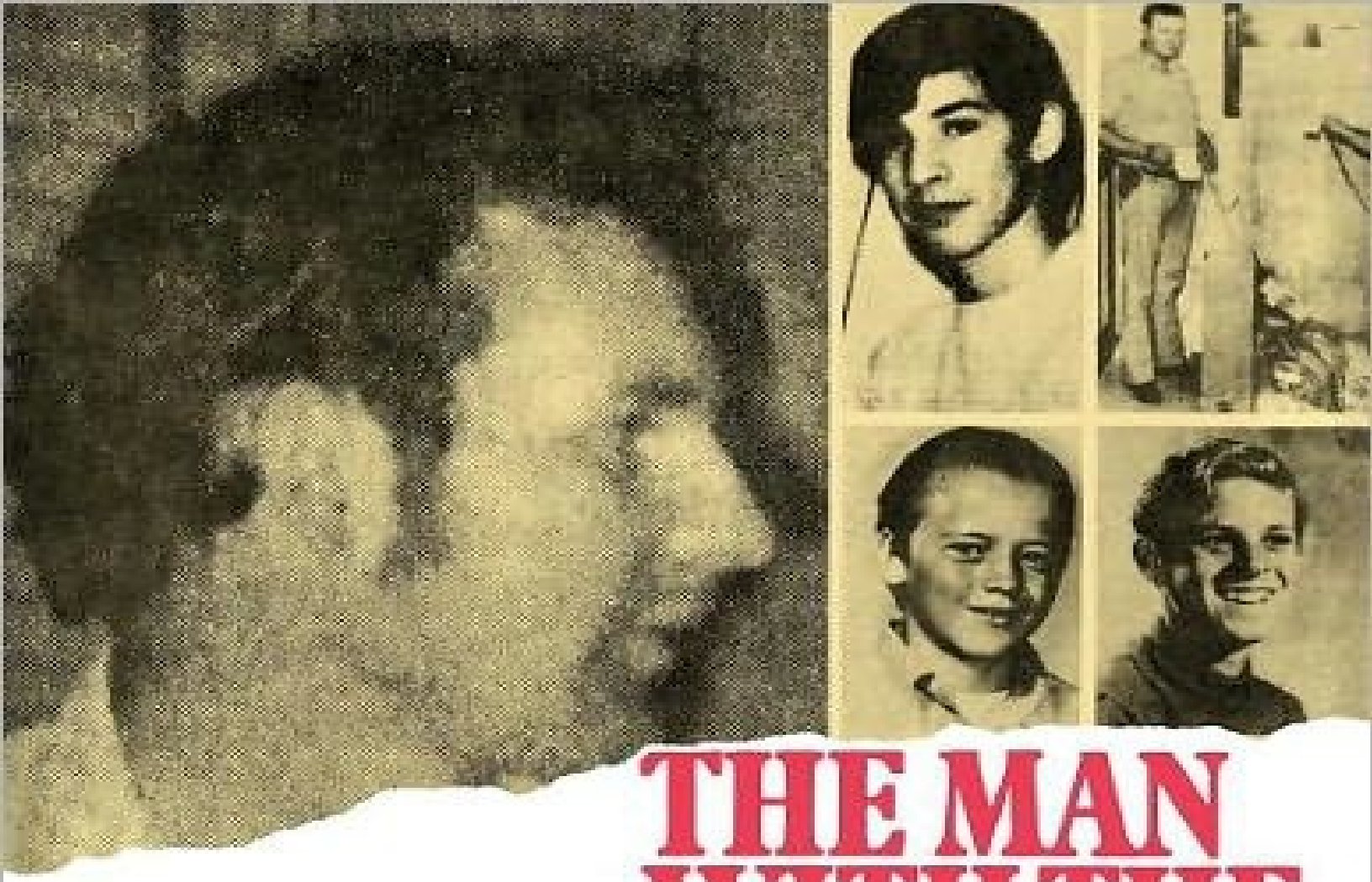

THE MAN WITH THE CANDY

THE STORY OF THE HOUSTON MASS MURDERS

by Jack Olsen

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FOR FLORENCE MAE DRECKSAGE OLSEN

I love Texas, but she drives her people crazy. I've wondered whether it's the heat, or the money, or maybe both. A republic of outlaws loosely allied with the United States, Texas survives, and survives quite well by breaking the rules.

—Peter Gent, North Dallas Forty, 1973

Two of Your Sons Are Missing

IN HIS CANARY-YELLOW HOUSE on shady Twenty-seventh Street in The Heights, a worn-out section of Houston, Fred Hilligiest got up long before the sun. A gaunt, wind-dried man of forty-nine, he striped streets for the city of Houston on weekdays and ran a small painting business in his spare time. This morning he had to be on the job at five; the Gulf sun would catch him soon enough and sear another layer of brown into his deep-lined face, as dark and dry as old parchment.

Dorothy Hilligiest, a radiant, pudgy woman with china-doll hands and a small voice to match, saw her husband off and began to work through a list of chores. In a few days, the family would begin its annual vacation to the riverside town of Kerrville and there were still errands to run—to the bank, the car wash, the grocery, the hardware store, to Sears for the last few pints of paint to finish trimming the windows. The Hilligiests worked on their house endlessly, landscaping and painting and decorating till the little bungalow gleamed like a model home on its corner lot. The fact that The Heights was generally considered run-down did not discourage the Hilligiests. A family could live in only one house at a time, and theirs was more than adequate. Others had weakened and lost heart, but Fred and Dorothy, deeply religious Catholics, intended to complete their ordained task of raising a family within these familiar walls.

Two children were already married and gone; three sons and a daughter remained, and by the time Mrs. Hilligiest returned from her first batch of errands in town, they were up and babbling about the vacation to come. It was May 29, 1971, Memorial Day weekend blazing hot in Houston. There was talk among the three boys about going to the pool at the Bohemian lodge to perfect a few strokes they would use later at the river. On the previous year's visit to Kerrville, they had met a couple of young water nymphs who had impressed and outswum them; this year would be different.

David, the family's blond-haired court jester and jazz drummer, called a friend to suggest a swim, but the friend was busy. By lunchtime, David still had not been able to round up a swimming companion for himself—being thirteen, he did not relish accompanying his younger brothers—and he ate his customary skimpy meal, a hot dog and a glass of root beer. As usual, Dorothy Hilligiest worried about him. He was a small boy with delicate features, five feet three

inches tall and not yet a hundred pounds in weight, and he ate like a gerbil. “Don’t worry,” Fred Hilligiest had told his wife. “He’s as strong as a li’l ol’ bull.” Sometimes the boy earned a dollar an hour working for his father’s striping company and pulled a man’s load without complaint.

After lunch, eleven-year-old Gregory and nine-year-old Stanley left for the pool, a mile away. David stayed in the house, looking to his mother “sort of lost,” and then announced, “I think I’ll go with them.”

Mrs. Hilligiest felt better; David would watch over his brothers at the pool. She heard him call “Wait up!” but then he said, “Oh, never mind,” and began walking slowly through the alley that led to Twenty-sixth Street. She made a mental note that his blue bell-bottom pants would have to be passed down to Gregory; they were at least two inches too short. The rest of his clothes fit neatly: a blue plaid shirt and nearly new tennis shoes. He was wearing his bathing suit underneath.

An hour later, the phone rang. It was Gregory, asking his mother to drive to the park and pick up him and Stanley; the pool had been too crowded. “Well, where’s David?” Mrs. Hilligiest asked.

“David?” Gregory answered. “He’s not here. He didn’t come with us.”

Mrs. Hilligiest was surprised. It was unlike any of her sons to take off without telling her where they were going. She and David had had plenty of conversations about *that.* But it was still afternoon and she decided that he must have happened on a ball game or a friend, or even gone to the pool by himself. Later he would call and put her mind at ease.

When Fred Hilligiest arrived home and flipped open the first beer of his precious evening hours, David still had not arrived, nor was he home by the time Dorothy was ready to serve dinner. Fred called the lodge and was told that his son had not signed the pool registry that afternoon. He called a few neighbors and learned that David had been seen by no one except a boy who had exchanged brief greetings with him about 2 P.M., right after he had left home. While dinner went cold, Fred and Dorothy perused their son’s room and found nothing out of the ordinary. His life savings of twenty dollars were in a drawer. His wallet, watch and ring were there, his clothes neatly hung in the closet. Wherever he had gone, he had planned no lengthy stay. The parents knew that something was wrong. Another thirteen-year-old might come home for dinner an hour or two late or not show up till the next day or even the next week without panicking his parents—depending on how the household was run—but an hour’s lateness by any of the Hilligiest children was cause for alarm. Dorothy and Fred began a sweep of the

neighborhood, checking with anyone who might have seen the boy, and calling his name. Periodically they returned to the house, to see if he had come back or telephoned, and then resumed their search in the family's Ford Galaxy.

At three in the morning, they began checking hospitals, but there was no record of the boy. At sunup, Dorothy Hilligiest called the police to ask for a city-wide lookout. The sleepy voice on the other end of the line told her not to worry, that David was probably staying overnight with a friend. "Boys do that all the time," she was told.

"No, sir!" Mrs. Hilligiest said firmly. "That cain't be. Our chil'ren have never been allowed to stay overnight without permission. We *always* know where they are, even in the daytime. It's just not David's nature to worry us like this."

The policeman advised her that times had changed, that boys were running away from the best of homes nowadays, and said he would have to list David in the runaway classification. No, there would be no official search for the child, but if he was spotted during school hours, he would be stopped and questioned. That was all the law allowed. A runaway was not a criminal.

Mrs. Hilligiest was aghast. In her anguished mind, she had imagined teams of detectives coming to the neighborhood, running down every clue, checking out every tip, and squads of uniformed policemen swarming the streets in an effort to retrieve something so precious as a son. "That's *all* you'll do?" she asked, incredulous. "You won't come look for him?"

"No, ma'am," the policeman said. "That's not our procedure." He explained that there was only a light crew on duty this Sunday morning, and when Dorothy insisted that at least a few of them be spared, he advised her to call back the next day.

She was crying when she put down the phone. "David's a human being!" she told Fred, himself red-eyed and exhausted from worry. "He's a *child!* And they won't even look for him."

Neither of the Hilligiests could sleep. They fed the other children as they arose, and then climbed back into the family car and cruised the narrow streets of The Heights, calling David's name at every corner, peering down the alleyways of small factories a few blocks from their home, inquiring in pizza parlors and fried-chicken restaurants as they opened, interrogating neighbors on the way home from church. It was late in the day before they picked up their first clue: David had been seen the afternoon before with a sixteen-year-old neighbor, Gregory Malley Winkle.

The widow Selma Geraldine "Gerry" Winkle lived with her two sons in a five-

thousand-dollar orange-sided frame house with walls akimbo, like most walls in The Heights. She was a tall brunette of forty-nine, with thin patrician nose and glowing skin that she anointed with cream every night before going to sleep. “People always laughed and teased me about it,” she told her close friends, “but I just can’t sleep without creamin’ it off.”

Mrs. Winkle had been a sailor’s wife, following her husband all the way to the Philippines, bearing his children and seeing the world like the old song about the Navy. A treasured snapshot showed her in Oriental pajamas, lifting a few inches of pant leg to expose a slender ankle. “Oh, don’t look at that!” she told friends, laughing girlishly. A larger picture, improved by delicate tinting, showed Harold “Wink” Winkle, first-class petty officer, U.S.N., in a wide grin and a sailor suit. That was before he was gripped by Huntington’s chorea, a crippling nervous disorder that kept him bedridden and spasmodically suicidal for five years, a nightmare that ended for Gerry Winkle in divorce. “Wink” Winkle died soon after, and bitter relatives disowned his former wife. By that time there were two sons, Malley and Benjamin, and Mrs. Winkle went to work emptying bedpans and scrubbing floors in a Houston hospital while she studied to become a practical nurse.

On a total income that never exceeded two dollars and thirty-one cents an hour, plus an occasional part-time job when she could find one, Geraldine Winkle struggled to bring up her two lively boys. When she made a down payment on the house on Twenty-sixth Street in 1965, most of the paint was flaked off and the insides were riddled with rot. She scraped and repainted, shingled the roof, paneled the tiny rooms with ash, and installed homey touches: a false fireplace with stacked logs, bowls of artificial flowers and wax roses, a gold mirror bracketed by scarlet candles in gilt sconces. She wanted the house to be attractive to her sons, to contain them happily while she worked at the hospital from early afternoon till nearly midnight. She was mother and father. “When it was time for discipline, I’d say, ‘This is comin’ straight from your daddy, ’cause he’s not here to do it himself.’ When I spanked them, I was their daddy, and when I cooked their meals, I loved them as their mother.” Sometimes she worried about how the simple house looked to her sons’ friends, till one day Malley, barely in his teens, reassured her. Proudly she recited the quote to friends: “‘Mother, I wish you’d stop worrying. I’m proud to bring children in this house ’cause you’ve always got the smell of something good in the oven and a nice clean house. In some of my friends’ places, everything is upside down and you can’t even find the beds ’cause of the junk on ’em.’”

Slowly Malley had taken over the role of the family’s male protector, watching

after his little brother Ben and trying to help his mother with the finances. From the age of ten, he worked: first on a paper route, then as a busboy, a janitor, a handyman mowing lawns and washing windows, anything that would produce a few dollars for his mother. He left comforting notes:

Mother, I went over to a friend's house. I'll be back after-while. Love Malley.

He remembered special occasions:

Dear mother this $10 well $5 of it is for your mothers day gift, not for bills, for something that you want.

Spend it on yourself!

This $5 doesn't come out of the money that I owe you, I still owe you $25.

This is your mothers day gift.

P.S. I didn't know what to buy you. I love you!

One summer he went to a public camp and dispatched a letter reminiscent of the wry satire of Allan Sherman:

Dear Mother I hope every thang is alright there. I am having fun at camp. I am going to go shoping after I get to Houston and then I will be home. One of my best friends got bit buy a copper-head snake when he was going on and highk. Give Ben a kiss for me. I love you. Malley W. xxxxxooooooo.

He was a handsome boy, with blond wavy hair, oversize blue eyes with long lashes and thick brows, and an easy, wide grin that he bestowed on everyone, as though there was something hugely amusing about his fellow man.

Privately he suffered the agonies of youth. "He used to get hair straightener like the colored people use," his mother said, "and work on his hair by the hour, 'cause he wanted it like all the other kids.' But he couldn't get it straight, and he was furious." By his sixteenth birthday, Malley had grown to five feet seven inches, only two inches shorter than his mother, with a slender build accented by broad shoulders. Little Benjamin, eight years younger, lionized his "Bubba." Mrs. Winkle said, 'I'd take Ben to the baby-sitter before I went to work, and he'd run right back home to Bubba. One day I took him to the sitter and a little while later I eased back through the front door and there was Ben with the TV on and a dog in his lap that he was pattin' on the head, and he had a glass of milk and a sandwich and he was sittin' in the rocker relaxin', and pretty soon he picked up a plastic pipe I'd bought him and he puffs on the pipe like a li'l ol' gray-headed man. I was gonna spank him, but I had to laugh."

The incident made Gerry Winkle realize that she could no longer depend on the inexpensive baby-sitters of the neighborhood, and she laid plans to send Ben

twenty miles away to Boy's Harbor, a foster home operated by the Shriners. By now both sons had begun to squirm out from under her control; from the time she went to work in the early afternoons, Malley was completely his own boss, and he was traveling with a gang of older boys. One night Gerry Winkle came home to find that her son had been arrested for stealing one of the precious ten-speed racers that every child in the neighborhood coveted.

"The police kept him in jail for about a month," Mrs. Winkle recalled. "They said I could take him home if I wanted to, 'cause it wasn't Malley's fault. It was the other boys with him that really stole the bike, and all Malley did was ride it. But the police said the sooner he learned the difference between a felony and a misdemeanor, the better off he'd be. They said, 'Miz Winkle, he has the chance to be the President of the United States if he learns his lesson young.' They were *so* impressed by him. They loved him!"

Malley was put on juvenile probation and returned home. In an outburst of boyish ingenuousness, he admitted that he had smoked marijuana two or three times, drunk a little, and sniffed glue and acrylic paint, but he swore to reform. Gerry Winkle forgave her firstborn son. "A kid that's had it tough all his life, how can you not forgive him? He never had a chance, with no father and all."

On a Saturday afternoon soon after the bicycle incident, David Hilligiest knocked on the door just as Mrs. Winkle was getting ready to leave for her job at the hospital. She was surprised to see him. She knew that Mrs. Hilligiest was an extremely protective mother who lately had frowned on the close friendship between the two boys.

David wanted to go swimming, and Malley asked his mother for eighty cents to get into the Bohemian lodge pool. Mrs. Winkle gave him a dollar and a half, but Malley insisted on handing back fifty cents; "that's the kind of guy he was." When she saw the two boys last, Malley was wearing gray-and-white-striped swimming trunks and a towel.

That night when Geraldine Winkle came home from work at eleven-thirty, the telephone was ringing as she stepped into the hot, dark house. "Mother," Malley's voice said, "I called 'cause I knew you'd be worried."

"Malley!" Mrs. Winkle said. "Where in the world are you?"

For a moment the line went silent. She heard her son whisper to someone else, and a muffled response.

"We're in Freeport, Mother," Malley said. "I called to let you know where I was at."

Freeport was a popular swimming and surfing spot on the Gulf of Mexico, and Mrs. Winkle was thoroughly disturbed that her son had gone so far. “What are you doin’ out there?” she said. “What in the world are you *doin*’ there? Malley, you know better. You’ve never—”

“I’m out here with the kids.”

“What kids?”

“Oh, just the kids,” Malley answered.

Mrs. Winkle said she certainly hoped there were adults along, but Malley said no. “I’m just with some kids. Joe and the kids.”

“Are there any girls?”

“Mama, there’s just a buncha boys and we’re havin’ a swim out here.”

Gerry Winkle asked how he had managed to get to Freeport, sixty miles away, and Malley said the “kids” had driven him. He said the others were out now, but any minute someone would return and drive him home to Houston.

Mrs. Winkle said, “You know better than to be out this late.” She hung up the phone.

For hours, the troubled woman fought off sleep. She remembered a time when Malley had gone to the Astroworld amusement park, eight miles away, and become so enthralled that he had missed the last bus home. He walked all the way, or so he told her when he came in at 3 A.M. Poor kid, she thought, I had to rub his feet and put him to bed. He was almost crying, he was so worn out. Well, at least he won’t have to walk this time. Drowsily, she wondered why Malley had had to ask someone else where he was. He knew Freeport backwards. Could he have been blindfolded? She was letting her imagination run away.

Around four-thirty she dozed off, only to jump up several hours later with the apprehension that her son was in serious trouble. She checked his bed; it was undisturbed. The phone lay cold and silent on its cradle. She telephoned a few young people around the neighborhood and learned that Malley and David had been seen talking to a man in a white van and that they had climbed in and been driven off, but the report was vague and insubstantial. No one was certain of anything, except that Malley was gone, and David along with him.

Gerry Winkle had no idea where to turn. The very next morning—and every Monday morning—Malley was supposed to call his probation officer, and there already had been severe warning that he would be sent to the reformatory at Gatesville if he broke probation or got into any new trouble. Uncertain of the possibilities, Gerry Winkle paced the floor and deliberately avoided calling the

police for help. “I just looked at the walls,” she said later, “and hoped to God he’d come back.”

Murdertown

—Sumerian tablet, about 3500 B.C. *The city, where the tumult of man is.*

HOUSTON, TEXAS, IS A CULTURE DISH of urban sprawl, a baffling and stultifying and astonishing congeries of good taste, bad taste and no taste scattered across five hundred square miles of flat Gulf coastal plains. It is also a vaporous cauldron where tempers are short and murder rates are high and there are few restraints, least of all on the God-given right to accumulate money.

The wonder is that a metropolis of any magnitude should have come to life in the middle of the scrub brush and salt grass, unrelieved by mountain or hint of hill to shield the scalding sun. But there stands Houston, a sleepy country town thirty years ago, now rich and prospering and loudly proud, suddenly the nation's sixthlargest city and clearly destined for third place behind those old beldames, New York and Chicago. Houston is growth and Houston is boom, and every local neophile will tell you: Houston is the future of the United States.

What meets the eye downtown is a cluster of glassy buildings, some of them mirrored and buffed to a high shine, reflecting one another in bronze and silver and gold. A few are garnished with pools and fountains the color of lapis lazuli (dye added) and here and there are tightly coiffured ornamental trees or modernistic artworks of finespun wire and hammered brass. The entire downtown business section is sealed by freeways, choked with traffic and offered in sacrifice to the great god Commerce, including the alcoholic-beverage industry that supplies a noxious Skid Row. Until the power shortage brought its demise, a big lighted orange wafer bearing the word "Gulf" rotated over one of the tallest buildings, and a subtle petroleum scent completed a vague impression of a giant, ultramodern filling station.

But atop one of these downtown buildings the visitor soon learns that there is more to Houston than meets the nose. In almost every direction, satellite groupings of clustered towers and spheres sprout from a broad emerald blanket of trees and bushes and golf-green lawns. The effect is as though one were standing at the center of a fairy ring of cities, each with its own stylistic personality, ranging from the blockily functional Lyndon B. Johnson Spacecraft Center to the southeast to the glaring white façades of the huge grain elevators to the northwest, and every edifice looking in the fresh rain as though a clean-up

team had just finished its work. There is every conceivable type of design, from the outhouse simplicity of the old rural South to soaring minarets and fluted granite columns and gold-leafed domes, and still the young architects and engineers stream toward Houston, sniffling money and challenge, as fast as they can finish college. Several hundred of them labor at a single project: a $1.5 billion plan by a huge corporation to transform thirty-two blocks along Main Street into "a city in the sky," with parking for forty thousand cars, a shopping center with parks and fountains and arcades high above the city, and sealed tubes to transport people like blow darts, rapidly and painlessly and screaming all the way, encased in plastic carriers.

At night, Houstonians descend from their spectacular office buildings and villages to mansions with Neo-Gothic arches and Grecian pillars, to condominiums with mansard and gambrel roof lines and Potemkin fronts. But mostly they flee to tract houses, tens of thousands of them fabricated of ticky-tacky and cinder block and huddled together like the green houses of Monopoly, providing protection from rain and sun while their mortgagors wriggle in upward mobility, like spermatozoa. After 6 P.M., the swarming downtown section becomes deserted, a struck set, peopled only by merchant seamen seeking the action, bored security guards and a few promenading blacks looking in store windows.

Until the power shortage imposed national limitations, Houston remained stubbornly incandescent; the fossil fuels that created the city's wealth were treated as though inexhaustible. Even at three and four in the morning, luxurious landscapes in rich sections like River Oaks were flooded by spotlights of many colors, improving on nature, and name plates and address numbers were splashed with yellow rays from hooded gas jets that were never extinguished. Long necklaces of soft blue mercury lights reached for miles along major streets like Main and Travis and Milam, twinkling southward toward the Warwick Hotel, with its glass outdoor elevator, down past the green-neon-tipped Shamrock Hilton, and even farther south to the shallow parabolic curve of the Astrodome, Houston's pride, a $32 million stadium where men play games in air-conditioned, hermetically sealed, rainless, sunless, breezeless comfort.

Houston, like Cairo, Egypt, lies athwart the thirtieth parallel, farther south than Casablanca, Baghdad, Algiers, more southerly than any part of Spain or Portugal, Italy or Greece. "Try to remember, Bill," a visitor wrote in 1885, "hell and houston both begin with a h." The city is an open sauna, relieved now and then by punishing thunderstorms and showers, and in summer by the odd hurricane. There are more air conditioners per capita than in any city in the

world; even the public transportation is refrigerated. Houston boasts a “no-sweat set,” affluent citizens who step from air-conditioned homes into air-conditioned limousines and drive to air-conditioned offices, taking their ease in the evening at air-conditioned restaurants and clubs and watching air-conditioned sports events. They are the lucky ones. The typical working-stiff Houstonian is drenched by perspiration except when he is drenched by rain.

In recent years, this community so lacking in meterological advantage has been second only to Orange County, California, in rate of growth, moving quickly from what one observer called wilderness to bewilderness in a tiny parenthesis of time. World War II accelerated the exploitation of the Gulf Coast’s rich hoards of oil and sulphur and natural gas, and rural depressions after the war sent thousands of hungry farmers sputtering toward the city in their jalopies. Battening on both trends, Houston doubled and trebled and quadrupled its population, and its growth shows no signs of abating. Along the fifty miles of the Houston Ship Channel, linking the city to the Gulf of Mexico, a massive marine-industrial complex has risen from meadows that once were the domain of muskrats and mink. Rice and wheat and other grains are sluiced into ships from giant spouts, while sweating blacks wearing respirators level the loads with rakes. Tons of baled cotton and whole boxcars of paper move out of the port, and so many gallons of oils and acids and liquefied gases and other petrochemical products that Houston has moved to third place among U.S. ports in total tonnage, even though the city itself has all the seafaring atmosphere and tradition of Indianapolis.

Unemployment is low, especially among skilled laborers and artisans, and the workingman makes enough money to live comfortably. His immediate superiors, the foremen and managers and supervisors, move into tony areas like Memorial and Tanglewood, sometimes buying more than they can afford, falling for real-estate come-ons designed to appeal to their competitive natures (“Your subordinates cannot afford to live here”). The oil rich wallow in their oil riches, increasing every year.

One Houston millionaire bought a hotel and assigned his wife to redo it, thus indulging her taste for interior decoration on a grand scale; he built public fountains and named them after himself, and he stocked his ranch with exotic game and rode to the hunt on half-tracks with machine guns. A Houston woman reported the theft of a mink coat—from her pickup truck. A furrier who knew the tastes of his rich customers sent out a letter: “I am taking bids from several people on a mink bedspread…. The bidding will start at ten thousand dollars if you desire the bedspread to be the only one in Texas, or at twenty-five thousand

dollars if you desire the bedspread to be the only one in existence." Roy Hofheinz, creator of the Astrodome and former Houston mayor, said he thought he had made his first million by the time he was forty, but he was unable to pinpoint the date. "You just don't notice things like that," Hofheinz said. Not in Houston.

This emphasis on the stockpiling of money has not always left time and energy for community planning, for human problems and sharings and mutuality. Forty-three years ago, Houstonians were advised by hired consultants to decide whether they were "building a great city or merely a great population." The city fathers opted for population, for economic growth, for more and more residents with more and more spending power. Through the years, any regulations that would inhibit the dollar flow have been summarily rejected. Thus Houston finds itself in 1973 with no zoning laws. If a man wants to set up a chili stand next to a monastery or shooting gallery by an old folks' home, no zoning law can stop him. The attitude toward public advertising is equally laissez-faire; despite the proximity of Lady Bird Johnson's aerie to the west, Houston has never been able to enact reasonable billboard control and the approaches to the city affront and assault the eye. City politicians have been slow to pass laws restricting real-estate development, and housing codes are paper tigers.

"My very first impression of Houston," said a Purdue professor in 1966, "was that this is not a city for pedestrians. It was built for people on wheels. The pedestrian here is a nonentity…." Daily some 1.3 million cars move about and through and over and under the city, traveling nearly 30 million passenger-miles on five thousand miles of paved streets and freeways. Hydrocarbons and lead oxides and other noxious fumes blend with the aroma of the petrochemical industry, and almost every afternoon a death cap of fouled air plops down upon the city. The Gulf humidity holds the chemicals in suspension and there are frequent "air stagnation advisories." Once signs were posted at the city limits: "Caution: breathing may be hazardous to your health." They were the work of the Harris County Pollution Control Board, fighting another losing skirmish with industrial boosters and boomers.

Houston's nickname, "The Bayou City," suggests a sublime region of slow-moving streams shaded by majestic trees, a Texas version of Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte,* but most of the bayous were lined with concrete years ago and have all the sylvan charm of the Harlem River. Buffalo Bayou, once "a most enchanting little stream," was deepened and broadened into the Houston Ship Channel, described a few years ago by a federal pollution commissioner as "one of the worst polluted bodies of water in

the nation. In fact, on almost any day this channel may be the most badly polluted body of water in the entire world." Houstonians shrugged, and went on making money. As an astute Houston *Post* editor, George Fuermann, wrote: "[Houston's leaders] almost always do manage, as they would say, 'to get the job done.' It has been our misfortune that most of the jobs they choose to get done are material; few are altruistic or humanitarian or even, in the larger sense, community." While Astrodomes and Astrohalls and Astroworlds are rushed to completion, undernourished blacks and overnourished rats battle each other for survival in the fourth ward, just across Interstate 45 from downtown. The rats are ahead.

The West begins two hundred miles away in San Antonio. Houston is the South; its settlers were of the same pioneering stock that built Atlanta and Tallahassee and Birmingham, and Houston was the capital of the Confederacy's Trans-Mississippi Department. Camellias and oleanders are rampant, crape myrtle and black willow abound, and corn whiskey is still highly prized, whether as country-brewed "white lightning" in Mason jars or fancified sourmash bourbon in heirloom bottles. Constant trafficking with northern and eastern businessmen has converted many Houstonians to Scotch, a liquor that comes conveniently up the ship channel, directly from Clydeside. Beer is the beverage of Houston's blue-collar workers; it flows out of four major breweries that sometimes fall behind demand, setting off clamors and cries that an industry so basic to the people's needs should be more responsible. Local experts have claimed, in perfect seriousness, that in summers of particular drought more beer is consumed in Houston than water.

The people are young, befitting a growing area. The median age is 27.5, contrasted with 35 for New York. Anglo-Saxon whites predominate, but Houston has also experienced infusions of ethnic groups-Germans and Czechs and Poles from the old country and from American ghettos, Cajuns from Louisiana, Indians from the Southwest, Mexicans from Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and Coahuila, blacks from the cotton country. Most of the ethnics have been thoroughly assimilated into the city's life. The blacks and Mexicans, like Faulkner's Dilsey, endure.

In matters of dress and personal style, the people keep watch on Dallas, which in turn looks to other big cities like New York and Paris. There is a lag and Houston is sometimes a turn or two out of phase with the self-appointed satraps of fashion. One sees women strapped into old-fashioned uplift brassières that shove their breasts forward like stilettos. Businessmen wear loudly contrasting outfits accented by chalk-white belts and shiny white patent-leather shoes, and in

off-hours climb into one-piece jump suits in imitation of the city's social monarchs, the astronauts.

Houston has never pretended to be a center of style or design, nor is it historically renowned for contributions to literature or the arts. Traditionally it has been a workingman's town, too busy to be bothered by the airy conceits of culture. Beleaguered local literati are quick to note that O. Henry lived in Houston (for eight months in the 1890's); except for him, The Bayou City cannot point to a single homebred creative artist of note. But one hears repeatedly that Howard Hughes was born in Houston and that the Hughes Tool Company, keystone of his antic financial kingdom, remains in the city. As in all matters local, commerce is ascendant.

The spoken language tends toward unabashed polyglot, the general dialect falling loosely within the boundaries of southern speech, but with distinct peculiarities of sound and usage. Way is pronounced why; horse becomes harse; and car, core. Slender sounds like sunder, laugh is pronounced life, and grass is grace or grice. Words like heights and like and store are split asunder (haw-eets, law-eek, stow-er), and there are genuine relic usages such as aks for ask, traceable to the Old English verb acsian or aksian. A ghostly *r* comes out of nowhere and slips into words like swallow, pronounced swaller, or is shifted around in words like the four-syllable Pedernales, which becomes the two-syllable Perdnails, or is dropped entirely from words like very, often pronounced ve'y. A dialect dividing line runs from Freeport, on the Gulf Coast, northwest toward Amarillo; the line roughly separates the area of hill-country cowboy pronunciation from the area of the distinctive East Texas rural accent, and it pierces the very innards of Houston, so that both dialects are heard, sometimes from the same speaker, with overtones of Cajun French that came up the bayou from Louisiana. One also encounters remnants of Texas German, Texas Spanish (sometimes called Tex-Mex), Texas Czech and Polish and Ukrainian, all reminders of the city's deep ethnicity. A waitress commands her customers at the end of a meal, "Y'all vill pleece come back! *Heah?*" Newly transplanted from Germany, she works in a French restaurant that serves spaghetti Bolognese, not far from a Japanese restaurant that pushes Saint-Emilion and Liebfraumilch with the teppan-yaki. In matters nationalistic, Houston is relaxed.

Mythology and Shakespeare hold that murder will out, but the statement has never been absolutely true, and certainly not in Houston. Violence is as much a part of the city's heritage as the post oaks and the bayous. When it was a tiny frontier town, Houston was described by a diarist as "the greatest sink of disipation [sic] and vice that modern times have known." An early diplomat

wrote: “I heard and read of more outrage and blackguardism in that town during my stay on the coast committed there, than throughout the whole of Texas.” A bishop proclaimed in 1843 that “there is a great need for a deep, a thorough, a sweeping revival of religion in Houston,” and more than a century later Billy Graham, wielding his customary theological meat ax, warned Houstonians that most of them “will spend an eternity in hell.”

The specialty was homicide, no undeveloped art in any part of Texas, where Charles Whitman climbed to the top of a tower and killed fourteen in little more than an hour, where Lee Harvey Oswald sniped John F. Kennedy, and where Jack Ruby, in turn, slew Oswald in front of a paralyzed assemblage of police officers.

In 1957, Houston had the highest per capita murder rate in the United States, earning the cognomen “The Murder City,” and it has never been far out of contention. In 1966, there were five dozen more victims in Houston than in all of England. In a typical year, Houston doubles London’s total number of murders, and London is six times as large and far more densely populated. In his definitive book *Houston: The Once and Future City*,* George Fuermann recounts a popular limerick:

In Houston we feel no aversion
When others are casting aspersion;
We never mind much
The murders and such—
We take them as week-end diversion.

Some blamed an inconsistent and woolly Texas penal code, some the lingering effects of the frontier tradition, some the public’s insistence on private weaponry. Most Houstonians were too enmeshed in business to waste time theorizing about the minor matter of murder. Since a mere three hundred or so were killed each year, and most of them black, the mass of citizenry went its way unperturbed, and newspaper editorials on the subject served mainly for the wrapping of fish. “Public indifference to the homicide toll lets murder stalk the community unhindered—and with implied public acceptance,” the Houston *Post* trumpeted in a 1967 editorial that might have been written in the days of Billy the Kid and the James gang. “The public is silent. There is no outcry against murder. And silence gives consent.”

Houston’s city fathers believed that the best government is the least government,

and the embarrassing murder rate had never become a priority item. Houston was growing so fast that all its municipal services continually trailed its practical needs, and the city struggled along with twenty-two hundred policemen, about half the number needed to secure so large and hectic a metropolis. The harassed policemen were underpaid; most of them were forced to hold outside jobs that occupy time and attention, and as one of them put it, “Everybody owes the credit union.” Not surprisingly, there was difficulty in recruiting, and the force remained permanently understaffed, while major crime rates rose year after year. Millions of dollars of federal cash were available to ameliorate such urban predicaments, but Police Chief Herman Short* scorned the handout. “I get sick and tired of people acting like that all you have to do to solve a problem is throw a bunch of federal money at it,” the chief declared. An archconservative who was politically close to Governor George Wallace of Alabama, Herman Short looked with suspicion on any federal assistance, and in the meantime his police department bungled the job. In 1973, Houston led American cities in number of suspects shot and killed by policemen, a figure generally reflective of poor discipline and attitude. Chief Short was fond of making bellicose statements (“When someone pulls a pistol on a policeman, he’d better be ready to die!”), which the less astute of his officers interpreted, at times of stress, as a mandate to fire at anything that moves or dissents. Human life was never the city’s most precious commodity.

Short was proud of his anti-riot procedures, his special unit for ferreting out subversives and radicals, his armory of machine guns and bulletproof war wagons and other hardware, but his department had hardly any community relations programs and was woefully deficient in that most basic of all police services: the cop on the beat. “We have so few men in uniform,” said a police official, “that a lot of crimes go undetected or uninvestigated.” Houston policemen had such morale-shattering case loads that some of them shunned their work altogether, a not unusual human reaction. Around police headquarters, a game was made of getting away early, slipping off to run a personal errand or shoot a round of golf, and otherwise beating the system that paid so little and demanded so much. It was not a matter of the men corrupting the system. No one can put his heart into a hopeless task day after day, and the job of policing Houston’s 1.3 million people with twenty-two hundred men was plainly hopeless.

Every Houston policeman developed a built-in inclination to avoid difficult situations, to iron out malfeasances painlessly, to do anything to avoid the dreaded paper work and the unbearable court appearances. Even the best

detectives, the ones who head promotion lists and have the proudest records, were forced to take refuge in technicalities. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but we don’t search for runaways.” “Your husband beat you up? Well, come on in and sign a complaint.” The bare minimum of the law was enforced. A fuming lieutenant ordered his men to make no fewer than two arrests a day; patrolling a hundred and eighty square miles of turbulent southwest Houston with twenty cars, they had spent most of their time enjoying the scenery. They had given up.

The homicide division, traditionally the elite corps of any department, had to handle fifty-six different classifications of crime, including all offenses against the person where greed is not the motive. “The cases that the rest of the guys won’t work, they lump on us,” said a fatigued detective.

Dedicated homicide officers were soon driven to ulcers and headaches. Most of the forty-two investigators in the division had long since produced a deliberate slowdown. “We disregard hundreds of crimes,” said one. “There’s enough murders alone to keep us occupied, without touching *any* of the other fifty-five classifications that come under our jurisdiction. We leave those cases to the men in uniform, or we just ignore them. You know how we handle a wife-beating? We tell the woman to file charges, then we send the husband a letter and tell him to come in and post bond. We never go out and arrest them; we’d be doing nothing else.”

Said another homicide detective, “Our division works only murders, period, and not every murder, either. We just say, ‘Well how much time are we gonna spend on this murder? If society hasn’t suffered a great loss, why, let’s go home and call it a day.’” Most such cases were secretly termed “misdemeanor murders,” and most of them were black.

On a typical morning, a jovial homicide lieutenant summoned one of his men. “Come on in here, I’ve got a real fine murder case for you.”

“Another one?” the detective said.

The lieutenant said, “Now I want you to get your ass out there and knock on doors and ring some telephones! I don’t want you fuckin’ around here in the office, y’understand?” He winked broadly at a visitor.

“Boss,” the detective said, “I ain’t prejudiced, but is it white or nigger?”

“It’s white, and you get to work now, heah?”

The detective picked up the folder, grumbling good-naturedly. He would examine the bones of the case and make a quick judgment on how much time he should allot—maybe an hour, maybe a day, perhaps two or three, but almost

never longer. A few of the youngest homicide detectives, unblooded and raw, chased clues in their off-hours, but they soon slowed down. “They come in here ready to solve our whole backlog,” said an old-timer, “but they get over it. That eager-beaver business, it’s not a terminal disease.”

Only one type of homicide was consistently accorded the full treatment, with the crime lab dusting for latent prints, two or three teams of detectives interrogating neighbors and friends of the victim, staff meetings with the lieutenants and captain on strategies, and hyperextended investigations. The murder of a prominent Houstonian, or a wealthy one, brought enthusiastic police attention. “We’d *never* let a uniformed patrolman work a murder involving important people,” said a veteran of the homicide division. “That’s rule number one, two and three.”

Rule number four was that in certain neighborhoods of Houston, the ones lacking in “important” people, one could cut corners, and murder might go undetected, let alone unsolved, for years.

Or forever.

*Doubleday and Company, 1971.

*Who announced his resignation at the end of 1973.

The View from the Heights

JUST TO THE NORTHWEST OF DOWNTOWN is a tired old neighborhood called The Heights, not quite a slum except for a few blocks, but plainly too afflicted with civic arteriosclerosis to resist slum-hood much longer. At night, when other parts of Houston sparkle and hum, The Heights is dark and silent under its canopy of gnarled and twisted trees, the streetlights at each corner blotted by leaves. The rare pedestrian walks in blackness, crossing under the soft blue glow of a light and then passing back into darkness, stepping into potholes and picking up the gray-white clammy mud of old shell streets, rutted and patched.

The Heights is futuristic Houston's doddering relation. It was christened in the late 1800's, an unsophisticated era before developers learned the sales appeal of names like Tall Timbers and Post Oak and Kashmere Gardens. The neighborhood towered a dizzying seventy-five feet in altitude, twenty-three feet above the bacterial swamps of the rest of Houston, and its rarefied air was thought to rejuvenate the lungs and purify the soul. In yellow-fever epidemics, thousands of frightened citizens grabbed their belongings and hiked to The Heights, and from these original tent villages with their howling babies and jaundiced adults a pastoral community slowly arose. Real-estate promoters saw the potential in the 1890's, and one of them, Daniel Denton Cooley, ancestor of Houston's renowned heart surgeon, stimulated interest by erecting the neighborhood's first mansion, an eight-bedroom house with every modern convenience, including ruby-red windows to discourage flies. The Cooley home was on the fanciest street in all of Texas: Heights Boulevard, designed as a showpiece by the developers, with fifteen-foot sidewalks, two paved thoroughfares of thirty feet each, and a green esplanade in the middle, planted in shrubs and trees and measuring sixty feet across. Wolves prowled at night and Mrs. Cooley kept her children upstairs for safety.

Through the years the area filled with the steady middle class, and by the time the city of Houston annexed the prosperous suburb in 1918 it measured six and a half square miles of solid bourgeoisie. Most of the houses were simple bungalows, set on stilts or pier-and-beam foundations against the moisture. On the avenues, there were a few edifices to rival Cooley's: stately homes with gables and parapets and spacious upper-story screened porches, houses with massive oaken doors and laminated pillars and ceilings forty feet high, built on lots nearly two hundred feet deep and as wide as the owner's ambitions.

With lavish assistance from nature, the industrious burghers landscaped in magnolia and Confederate jasmine, oleander and hibiscus and Heavenly Blue morning-glories, fragile day lilies of pink and garnet and lollipop yellow, lush green banana trees and oaks, Chinese tallows and jack pines. Some of the trees grew topcoats of sinuous vines and others dripped Spanish moss nearly to the ground. Heavy rain and dazzling sun alternated, and the puddles of the neighborhood gave life to whole universes with every shower of summer. Shallow drainage ditches were dug in place of sidewalks, and there were hardly any walkways. By such simple methods, the area kept itself relatively dry, at least compared to the rest of the sodden town, and as green as the bowling lawns of Surrey.

Man-made tropical parks require immense care, constant effort with pruning hooks and trowels and shovels, and when they begin to fade, they fade fast. The Heights remained stable until World War II, but America's new mobility was too much for the staid old neighborhood. Younger generations that might have been content to remain in the musty homes of their childhood, living off patriarchal indulgence and later inheriting the places for themselves, now were swept away by the swirls and currents of war and postwar. In the early 1950's, when cities were still short on housing and Houston had become the mecca for every failed rancher and displaced cowpoke in Texas and Oklahoma and Louisiana, homes in The Heights began to be split into floor-through apartments, and split again into individual rooms. Land in the fractionating neighborhood dropped in price, cheap labor was plentiful, and small factories and foundries and machine shops began to appear, unburdened by zoning laws. The dominant examples of new get-rich architecture were prefabricated sheds, cheap and simple and easy to erect, good for turning a quick dollar but an effrontery to the eye in their unseemly coats of robin's-egg blue and Day-Glow orange, as though flash and color could make up for designed tawdriness. Cottage industries proliferated; junk stores thrived on the stream of *objets d'art* pouring from the crumbling mansions. Hand-lettered signs appeared in windows, SEWING, NEEDLEWORK, WASHING, and there were handy-Andy repair shops with greasy machinery propped among the shrubs and the roses on the lawns. The area around Yale Street, once a center of commerce in The Heights, was infiltrated by Army-Navy stores, loan shops, fresh vegetable stands, storefront churches (JESUS SAVES AND SATISFIES), ma-and-pa groceries and hamburger joints and pizza parlors and every kind of small, underfinanced business except taverns, which remained banned under an old law.

Now the people who once had heard nothing louder than the clip-clop of the

milkman’s morning horse began to hear the raucous bawling of Diesel horns as railroads transported the commerce of the Gulf Coast megalopolis along the edges of The Heights. Cross-country freights hauled sulphur and liquefied gas in jumbo tank cars; gray Cotton Belt cars were loaded with rice for the north and west, while whole trains of Kansas and Oklahoma wheat and sorghum and milo rumbled into the port of Houston in ninety-ton covered hoppers, shaking the earth and savaging sleep. Spur tracks reached out from the Southern Pacific and the Katy on the southern edge of The Heights and citizens’ ears were assaulted daily by the locomotives’ crossing signals, repeated at each corner, as creaking boxcars were eased onto the new factory sidings. Trains rode over and under most of the rest of Houston, on bridges and through tunnels, but they crossed The Heights at grade level, and the flashing barriers were lowered so often that residents took to driving around them, cheating death. Most of them succeeded.

By the 1970’s, The Heights had become a broken collection of mini-neighborhoods and subneighborhoods with no over-all character of its own and no common cause except suspicion of outsiders. On the fringe were shabbily decadent areas, displaced Appalachias, where one could imagine retarded children or senile aunts locked away in attic crawls, muttering in the shadows. Spotted about the shady overgrown streets, there were still a few antique mansions, with turrets slightly askew and windows cracked and weeds hip-high over abandoned formal gardens, their gazebos rotting and their trellises splintering, but proud homes nonetheless, held together with twine and occasional dippings into capital by bent and withered figures who detested tax collectors and spouted senile curses at trespassers.

Whole blocks of The Heights were stubbornly kept neat and clean, garnished with flowers, lawns carefully manicured, houses repainted every three or four years, but even in the middle of these prideful areas one saw occasional falling-down bungalows out of Erskine Caldwell, slanting porches strewn with abandoned refrigerators and washing machines, muddy front yards scarred by tire tracks, and no blade of grass to hide the damage, gray, weathered, slatternly houses inhabited by the poor. Bony children played with chrome shopping carts “on loan” from the supermarkets. Families adjourned to the front steps on Sunday afternoon, lacking the funds to attend the refrigerated sports events at the Astrodome, and drank beer and listened to country-and-western music. Withered ladies perambulated along the streets, sheltering their heads from the sun with fragile umbrellas that were hastily lowered when the wind came up. The rolling stock of the neighborhood was six—and eight-year-old Mustangs and Corvairs and Ramblers, and the fondest hope of any teenager was to get a ten-speed bike

for Christmas, or a nearly junked Corvette or motorcycle to overhaul. If it could be made to run, that was an unexpected bonus.

For the most part, the foodstuffs of these people tended to be the traditional starches and greens of the rural South. Women bore many children quickly, and thickened about the middle; men were reminiscent of the vaudeville line, “I used to have a four-inch chest expansion, but that’s all behind me now.” The staples were potatoes, white bread, baking soda biscuits, grits, rice, beans of all types from wax to red, and sometimes the cheaper cuts of meat, all washed down with six-packs of cold beer, iced tea supersaturated with sugar, or canned soda pop. The desserts and snacks were chemicalized confections like Hostess Twinkies, Oreo cookies, cupcakes and fried pies, chocolate doughnuts, potato chips, gooey candies and pralines. The residents followed their protruding stomachs to the grave, blissfully untutored in disciplines like diet and nutrition. “You can’t expect these people to bother with things like that,” an understanding journalist explained. “They’re too busy coping with what they can see and hear, what they can feel with their hands. They don’t extrapolate, they don’t philosophize. Life is tough enough without throwing in intangibles like body ecology, pollution, without worrying about clean air and how much protein you ate for breakfast. Things like that are for River Oaks, not The Heights. So the place ends up with tired blood, a complete lack of vitality. What the hell, the people don’t get their name in the papers except when they die, and then it’s just a half inch of type, if the funeral director remembers to phone it in before the first edition. No newsmakers live here, no wealthy, no civic leaders, no socialites. It’s a sad, tired place. The rest of Houston kind of forgot about it.”

In recent years the soporific neighborhood has shown a stirring of interest in certain social matters, such as the thickening cloud of blacks and Chicanos on the borders. “A subject like that attracts their attention,” says Craig Washington, a civil rights leader. “The white people in The Heights are the ones who weren’t affluent enough to flee, and they’re beginning to feel trapped. They’d get out in a second if they could, but they don’t have enough money, so instead they start worrying about law and order.”

Traditionally crime was never a problem in The Heights, earlier because of the close-knit community life, later because there was so little to steal. Burglars might reside there, but they committed their misdeeds in Houston’s mushrooming suburbias or in the business sections. A few years back, a fey lunatic called The Heights Phantom stalked the dark streets, but only a few timid ladies took him seriously when he appeared naked at their doors and then ran off cackling into the shadows. After his arrest, no one could make a positive

identification. “The girls couldn’t remember anything above the waist,” said a bemused detective. “They wanted a nude showup!” The Phantom was released and told to pull himself together.

Such were the grave crime problems of The Heights, shielded from larceny and burglary by its own austerity, and fully dedicated to the mythic principles embodied in the supercharged political phrase: “law and order.” The real crime rate was negligible; there was almost no murder, in sharp contrast to the rest of Houston, and Richard Nixon’s Silent Majority, a chimera in some parts of the country, was dominant.

“Up here the whole issue in the election was whose side the police chief was on,” an elderly resident observed. “Chief Short was hell on Nigras and hell on dope. Up here, that spelt law and order.” He laughed. “It’s funny,” he said, “how things change. Now they’re holding vigilante meetings in the churches, and they ain’t nobody in the whole Heights can figure out the answer: Where was our police?”

TRAUMA *à deux* NEARLY OVERWHELMED Fred and Dorothy Hilligiest when they came to the full realization that their son was unmistakably, undeniably gone, and that no one was going to help. They stopped eating; sleep came in short spans, interrupted by nightmares and shiverings. Repeatedly they awoke with the same words on their lips, “It’s not real, it’s all a nightmare, I’m *awake* now,” and then had to face the loss over again. For days, every awakening was a new ordeal, visited upon them with Assyrian cruelty for reasons they would never comprehend. Dorothy’s voice turned weak and broken, a permanent tremolo impressed on it by shock. Fred alternated between frenzies of physical activity and shudders of grief, and for six weeks, he was unable to work.

From the second night, the whole family went to bed in shifts, so that someone would always be up and around to grab the phone or open the door for David. Fred slept by night and Dorothy by day, changing over at five in the morning. A new telephone line was installed, and friends and business associates were instructed never to call on the family’s old line, permanently reserved for the missing boy. In the early morning hours, Mrs. Hilligiest would stare at the phone, willing it to ring, but it remained silent, her prayers unanswered.

After Geraldine Winkle told the couple of her Saturday-night conversation with Malley, Dorothy and Fred assigned their children to the telephone vigil and drove to Freeport, a city of twelve thousand. They began a hectic search, checking every public place and cruising the beach and talking to hippies and fishermen, shell collectors and sun bathers. They learned nothing. When they

arrived home, they heard a secondhand rumor from neighborhood children that David and Malley were being held in “a house on stilts, with a high steeple, down on the beach at the Bolivar Peninsula.” The weary couple headed back to the Gulf of Mexico. The car broke down and they rented another. They searched sixty miles of waterfront on the highway side and then drove the same stretch on the beach, from the Sabine Pass, across from Louisiana, southwest to Port Bolivar, near Galveston. Whenever they saw a habitation that approximated the description they had been given, they stopped and made inquiries. Late at night they came to an old church that once sheltered young runaways, a weatherworn structure “on stilts, with a high steeple,” but it was closed and boarded, and had been for months.

They got home in time to pick up another rumor, this one that David had been hit in the head and seriously injured while surfing in Galveston, and that an older resident had paid the hospital bill and taken the boy home to recuperate. Fred drove to Galveston and checked hospital admission lists. There was no record of a David Hilligiest, and nothing in Galveston police files. A police clerk accepted a photograph of David and said he would keep in touch.

By Wednesday, four days after the disappearance, the parents had begun to move like sleepwalkers, and out of desperation they hired a private investigator at twenty dollars an hour. “We couldn’t afford *not* to, way we seen it,” Fred said. “We needed professional help.”

The detective attacked the problem as though David were his own. “I don’t know what made the man drive hisself so hard,” Fred Hilligiest said. “Him and I together, we was going three, four nights in a row without a lick of sleep, mostly around Freeport or down on the Bolivar Peninsula, walking and driving the beach, and not a complaint outa him. Sometimes one of us would try to catch a little cat-eye in the car. Going across on the Bolivar Ferry, he’d say, ‘Let’s rest a little.’ I’d say, ‘Well, you go ahead,’ and then I’d see that he was wide awake, too. After maybe seventy-two straight hours without sleep, we’d just get ourse’fs a cuppa coffee and keep right own.”

At the end of two weeks, the detective was told that a young runaway named Samantha had information on the case. He tracked her to a poor section of The Heights and found a highly neurotic teenager with a rambling, disoriented manner of speaking. He assembled the Hilligiests and the girl in his office and began an insistent interrogation that lasted late into the night. Under pressure, Samantha sobbed out a disconnected story. “Somebody told me a long time ago that they buried people, that they had ’em buried east or south or something like that, buried from their necks down,” she said. “I had a dream about it, too. They

buried ’em and they just left ’em.” The girl said she once had been taken to the burial site, an old garage or shed, where “a guy from the Mafia” entombed a small boy in sand before her eyes and then drove off and left him there.

The detective asked if she thought she could point out the garage, and Samantha took him on a long, backtracking tour of Houston, culminating at an automobile repair shop off the busy Southwest Freeway. It turned out to be a reputable business establishment where race cars were tuned and repaired; close questioning turned up nothing that tallied with the rest of the girl’s story, and the floor of the place was concrete, not sand. When some of Samantha’s young friends sent word to the Hilligiests that the disturbed young woman spent most of her days reading horror comics and spinning ghoulish fantasies, they realized that they had wasted time and money.

The private investigator turned to other leads, and one day Geraldine Winkle told Dorothy Hilligiest, “I wish to God you’d call off your detective.”

“Well, Miz Winkle, we want to find our boy!” Dorothy replied. “I’m ’bout to go crazy. I just cain’t sit here and not do anything about it. We’ll never give up searching for David.”

Mrs. Winkle said, “I’m just afraid if Malley turns up they’ll send him to Gatesville for violatin’ probation. The judge warned him.”

Mrs. Hilligiest understood, and it seemed to her that the two of them were at cross-purposes, at least for the moment. She said firmly, “Well, Miz Winkle, from now on it’s every man for hisself!”

But after three weeks, the Hilligiests were forced to grant Mrs. Winkle’s request to unhire the detective; they ran out of money. “We owed him five or six thousand dollars,” Fred Hilligiest said,” ’cause that man worked a lot of hours.” The bill was compromised amicably, and Fred was grateful. A few days later the upset couple went to Police Chief Herman Short’s office for help, now that their financial resources were wiped out, but the chief was unavailable. An inspector asked what progress they had made.

“Not much,” Fred said. “We hired a private investigator, but he couldn’t turn up my boy.”

“How much did you pay him?” the inspector asked.

“Eleven hundred dollars.”

The policeman looked aghast. “For how many weeks?”

“Three.”

“Don’t you know that a private investigator’s for rich people, not for poor

people?" the inspector snapped. "What's his name?" Then he called in his secretary and ordered a search of the records to determine if the detective had the required licenses and accreditations to operate lawfully in the state of Texas. Soon afterward, the investigator was summoned to court, and Fred Hilligiest was mortified. "We didn't go to the police to bitch about the man," he said. "All we wanted was some he'p. We were pleased with the detective; he done a good job at a fair price. Even after he was off the case, he kep' in touch, called me whenever he got a clue. The police must have spent a thousand dollars prosecuting him. It hurt me real bad that they would take so much time and money to get a fella that was out there he'ping me look for my son, but they wouldn't spend a nickel to he'p look for David theirse'ves."

Assisted by Mrs. Winkle, the Hilligiests resumed their patchwork search. They had hundreds of posters printed, showing pictures and descriptions of the two boys, and offered a thousand-dollar reward, which Fred was prepared to borrow, if need be, with the greatest of pleasure. Gerry Winkle asked if it would be acceptable for her to pay back her half of the reward money on a weekly basis, and the Hilligiests told her not to worry; if the boys were found, they had no intention of making the poor woman pay. Gerry's two brothers were cross-country truck drivers and they circulated the posters out of state, while neighborhood friends helped to tack them on telephone poles and tape them to store windows.

After the flyers had been distributed, Fred and Dorothy extended their personal search to Arkansas and West Texas and Louisiana, visiting churches and YMCA's and runaway homes and halfway houses, without result. At home, Dorothy would jump out of bed five or six times a night, chasing wisps of noise, hoping that she was hearing David's footfall at last, shy and tentative on the back porch, where she had seen him last. Outside the house, there was a stop sign on Ashland Street, and she had to discipline herself not to run to the porch and check every car. "I would keep thinking maybe it might be him," she said. "I'd think, 'Maybe somebody threw him out on the lawn.' You just cain't imagine the wild things that go through your mind." The remains of a scrawny teenage boy were found at a nearby lake, with skull missing, and the Hilligiests spent panicky moments inspecting the belongings: rings, keys, and forty-three cents. They were not David's.

By the time Christmas had come and gone, Geraldine Winkle had accepted the possibility that her son might be gone forever. "Deep down inside I asked myself a true question and I answered it truthfully. I knew Malley wouldn't run away and I knew David wouldn't either. There'd of been a note, there'd of been

somethin'. Why, I have thrown away a dozen thousand notes from Malley, but not a single word after he disappeared. What else could he be but dead? I made the mistake of sayin' that to Miz Hilligiest one day, and it was the wrong thing. She was like a woman runnin' around in a trance. A nervous trance. She couldn't face the truth."

In their search for a clue or a plausible theory, the families had picked over the details of their sons' lives—their behavior, their habits, every incident and happening in their short spans. They set up every conceivable hypothesis and either checked it out or shot it down. The Hilligiests wondered for a time if David might have offended somebody, but this seemed remotest of all possibilities. He was, as his mother explained, "a clowny kind of boy, but he never carried a joke too far or hurt anybody's feelings. He'd always do li'l things like—Well, he knew how much I wanted the neighbors to think we were a respectable family, so when we'd drive up in the car David would stagger out and fall on the ground and roll around, pretending he was drunk, and then his brothers would imitate him. David knew this would get me, because we had two very dignified neighbors across the street. I'd say, 'Oh, what are they gonna *think?* David, stop that!' That'd just set the fire under him, and he'd go crazy, rolling around and all. It was so funny, I just couldn't keep from fifing. Now who'd harm a clowny child like that?"

They re-examined his relationship with Malley. There had been two and a half years' difference in the boys' ages, but only a few hundred feet separating them geographically, and for a time they had played together almost daily. At first, Malley had come over to David's; the cautious Hilligiests had an unbendable rule that their children could not leave their own property until they reached the second grade, and then only at specific times and on specific request. David was never allowed to wander at will, even up to the time of his disappearance.

One day when David was eight and Malley eleven, the two boys had played at Malley's house and David was late getting home. "Where've you been?" Dorothy asked.

"We went someplace to visit," the child answered.

Mrs. Hilligiest spoke sternly. "David, you *know* you were supposed to stay at Malley's! Whenever you go to somebody's house to play, that's where you're supposed to stay."

"Well, Malley knows this man that has a candy factory behind the school on Twenty-second, and he's real nice. He has a pool table and everything. He give us candy, and there wasn't nothing wrong with it."

Dorothy had been annoyed, but she was not the type to fly into tantrums in front of her children. “Son,” she said evenly, “I don’t want you going there ever again. That man has a bidness to run, and you’re supposed to play wherever I give you permission, and *no place else.”*

A few years went by, and once again David failed to come home on time. Mrs. Hilligiest cruised the neighborhood, and in front of the candy factory behind Helms Elementary School, six blocks from the house, she spotted two familiar bicycles. She rang the bell, and a young man—“average size, mild-mannered”—opened the locked door.

“Is my son in here?” she asked. “I understand that boys come over here to play pool. His bicycle’s out here. Would you get him?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the man said politely, and produced Malley and David from a back room. Slightly ill at ease, Mrs. Hilligiest offered to buy some candy. The man sold her a small box of pralines and divinity for a dollar, “and it was right good candy, I can still taste how delicious it was.”

She was disturbed by the situation, but not displeased with the nice young man. “I’d appreciate it,” she said diffidently, “if you wouldn’t let David come over here. I know you run a bidness, and he’s got no reason being here.”

As though to reassure her, the man said, “Well, I’m a friend of Mrs. Winkle. She works here part-time, and so does Malley.”

“Well, that’s up to the Winkles, but I’m just speaking for my own son.”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, I’ll comply with your wishes then.”

By the time David was eleven and Malley into his teens, the elder Hilligiests advised their son that Malley was roaming too far and too fast for their own peace of mind and the relationship would have to end. After that, Malley sometimes played with David in the Hilligiest yard, but the boys saw less of each other. The parents had been relieved, and the incident with the candyman was pushed to the backs of their minds. Reliving it now in the light of David’s disappearance, they could see no connection whatever. They drove by the old candy factory, but it was closed and locked. Another business had moved into the shed, and the man with the candy was nowhere to be seen.

Geraldine Winkle had her own memories of the little candy factory, but she too saw no significance in them. One day in the mid-sixties, when Malley was about ten or eleven years old, he had come home and announced that the candyman had offered him a job sweeping up pecan scraps and peeling caramel off the floor and washing stainless-steel cooking vats. When Mrs. Winkle had checked

out the place herself, she was offered a part-time job, dipping pralines on a piecework basis.

The small factory in its overheated blue-green shed was as busy as a maternity ward when Nurse Winkle arrived to begin her part-time job; there were so many orders stacked up that the manager, a pleasant young man named Dean Corll, was running the assembly line on two full shifts, from early morning till after midnight, and was hiring all the extra help he could find to supplement his standard work force of five women. The plant made divinity, pralines, pecan chewies and the other simple confections that are lumped together in the South and Southwest under the classification "Mexican candies," although they are no more endemically Mexican than Latvian or Ugandan.

From the first day, Mrs. Winkle found her part-time boss a fascinating study. "He was like a man that had *nothin'* on his mind but success. The lights were on many a night, all night. I got to feelin' sorry for him, that the job was too much for a poor kid like him maybe in his mid-twenties. His mother seemed to be involved in the business, but she really wasn't much help. Her name was Mary West, and she used to come in there flashin' her diamonds and her furs. She was determined to get married. Seems like her latest husband was some kind of a nut and she'd divorced him. She met him through a computer dating service, and now she was goin' back to the computer lookin' for another one. I couldn't figure her out. She had a big smile and a wonderful personality, a little plump but a nice figure, too. She was an attractive woman of maybe fifty, but looked younger. Why'd a person like that have to go to a computer for a husband?"

Sometimes Mary West gave the appearance of pushing her son. "She'd want to know why he hadn't done this or done that," Gerry Winkle said. "I never did get the story straight, but one of her ex-husbands had a candy company nearby and she wanted to beat him. That's what drove Dean so hard, I guess."

Young Corll had another facet to his personality, according to Mrs. Winkle. "He was crazy about children; he'd let them walk all over him. Every afternoon that doorbell would ring and there'd be a gang of little kids from the Helms grammar school, beggin' for broken candy. Then Dean put a pool table in the back and the boys used to knock at all hours. 'Can we play pool?' When I found out Malley was goin' there after work, I told him to cut it out. Not that I had any feelin' that Dean was doing wrong. I just felt that he shouldn't be disturbed. He worked awfully hard and I respected the man for it."

While Geraldine Winkle slowly adjusted to the loss of Malley, just as she had adjusted to the loss of her sailor husband years before, the Hilligiests were

refusing even to consider the possibility that their own son might be gone forever. No clue, no hint, no rumor, no wild idea was too outlandish to be taken seriously. Sometimes they would drive a thousand miles on weekends, searching. They ran up high telephone bills that completed the destruction of the family budget. The window-trimming job that had been interrupted by David's disappearance remained undone through the summer, the paint cans from Sears unopened. The vacation to Kerrville was called off, and never mentioned, not even by the other children. "Everything stopped," said Dorothy Hilligiest. "Everything."

A friend took the parents to a seer who reported in a quavery, astral voice that David was with someone "adult in size but not in age," that he was being kept "in a grassy area around water, but not a beach or river," that he was wearing cutoff blue jeans and was adequately clothed and well fed, "but he cries often, and he wants to go home."

"It sounded just like David would act," Mrs. Hilligiest said, "and it really upset us. Now we felt like that something was holding him and preventing him from coming home."

A psychic named Clifford Royce arrived in Houston to make a public appearance at a motel, and the Hilligiests paid their six dollars and were told to write their question. They did not bother to ask if David was alive; they knew that answer. Dorothy wrote: "When will our boy come home?"

Royce hesitated. Then he said in an apologetic tone, "I hate to tell you this, but the way I see it your boy is dead in a south Texas town." He asked them to remain after the session, but Fred and Dorothy were already dashing for the door, too disturbed to pursue the matter.

Months went by before they got up the nerve to consult another clairvoyant, and then friends prevailed on them to visit a man who had developed a supernatural technique for locating lost children. The Hilligiests provided a large picture of David, over which the man superimposed a map and a plumb bob, and after a short period of meditation he advised them that Malley was in jail and David was safe in Dallas. The Hilligiests drove to Dallas and found nothing to bear the clairvoyant out.

Soon afterward they contacted a Dutch seer who informed them by transatlantic mail that David was lying in a hospital with amnesia, facing a window toward the south, a pathetic look on his face. Dorothy broke down when she heard the report, but soon began calling hospitals, to no avail. Still another psychic told the parents that he envisaged their son on Bourbon Street in New Orleans; a check

of the famous place turned up nothing but the usual bars and clubs and jazz joints. Little blond-haired David Hilligiest would have stood out like a beacon on Bourbon Street, but no one remembered him.

For weeks after a newspaper article told about the parents' plight and their offer of a reward, the telephone kept jangling. A caller told Mrs. Hilligiest about an ex-convict who had bragged that he knew where the boys were. The caller warned that the man was armed, angry and dangerous. Early the next morning, before most people leave for work, tiny Dorothy Hilligiest knocked on the man's front door and demanded entrance. "I talked to him for an hour and a hife and he turned out to be nice. He denied that he knew anything about David or Malley, and he said he was tired of being accused of things he didn't do. He said his neighbors were always getting the police on him."

A young boy telephoned the family and said he had seen David hitchhiking toward Galveston. Dorothy said, "Do you know what David looks like?"

The boy said, "Sort of."

"Did you go to school with David?"

The boy hung up.

A girl who sounded like a subteen telephoned and said she wanted the money in advance.

"You give me David for my thousand dollars," Mrs. Hilligiest told her. "Do you know where he is?"

"Yes, ma'am," the girl answered.

"Well, you bring my boy and I'll give you the money."

"No, ma'am, we don't play that way."

The girl bargained halfheartedly for a few minutes more and then admitted that she was joking. "Well, that's *cruel!"* Dorothy said. "You just don't *do* people like that!"

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I'm truly sorry."

"Well, I'll accept your apology," the tolerant woman said. "But don't do anything like this again, hear? We've been under too much strain already."

There was a steady stream of reports from people who swore that they had just seen the boys. "They're over at the Jack-in-the-Box at Twentieth and Shepherd!" a telephoner said, and the Hilligiests jumped up from the dinner table and rushed to the scene.

"I just seen 'em walking on Fourteenth Street near the grocery!" another man

announced, and once again the Hilligiests were off.

A policeman's son telephoned a report that he had seen Malley and David with two girls, but later recanted his story after Fred had wasted several days running down the lead. Mrs. Hilligiest said, "There were jillions of those calls, and they 'bout drove us crazy, but we had to take them as truth. One child would call and breathe heavily and whisper, *'David's not with Malley. David's not with Malley.'* I'd say, 'Well, where is David?' and he'd hang up. He did this over and over."

"But we were glad when kids called, *any* kids," Fred Hilligiest said. "We thought there must be a kid someplace that knew something, and if we kep' talking to 'em, one of these days they'd make a slip."

Often the Hilligiests found themselves confiding in a lifelong friend of David's who seemed to retain a sympathetic interest in the case after others had begun to act politely bored. Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., fifteen years old at the time of the disappearance, was beginning to be a sorrowful figure to his young peers on Twenty-seventh Street. A junior high school dropout, he had severe acne, disheveled hair that sometimes twisted into curly knots, round owlish eyes, and a transfixing stare like the young Edgar Allan Poe. Sometimes he appeared slightly disoriented on the streets, and sometimes he appeared plain drunk. The Hilligiests felt compassion; they knew that there had been serious family trouble and a rancorous divorce, and that Wayne once had been a sweet and mannerly child. In fact, he had been one of David's earliest playmates. When both boys were in the preschool years, Wayne's mother or grandmother would walk him the half block to the Hilligiests' and drop him off to play. Promptly after one hour the child would be picked up and returned home. "I liked this," Dorothy Hilligiest remembered. "I said, 'Well, this is my way of doing, too.' It showed that they cared who the boy played with."

Soon after the disappearance in 1971, Wayne Henley called on the Hilligiests and expressed his sympathy, and after the family printed posters, he helped to distribute them around The Heights. "He put them into Hamilton and Lincoln schools for us," Fred recalled, "and we really appreciated it. He was always so understanding. Ever' time he'd see us, even if he was a little wobbly hisse'lf, from drugs or beer or I don't know what, he'd say he was still looking for clues, and he said he'd be sure to pass along anything he learned. He give us a feeling that he was trying."

In the summertime, eleven-year-old Gregory Hilligiest sometimes played with Wayne Henley's little brother Ronnie, and one day Greg came home and told his

parents he had discovered a fascinating new way to pass the time. It was called poker, and it could be played for money or fun, but of course Greg played it only for fun. “Where?” his mother asked quickly.

“Down at the Henleys’,” Greg answered. “Sometimes the big boys play with us, and then it’s *really* fun.”

“What big boys, Gregory?”

“Oh, Wayne and his friends. A blond-headed boy named David Brooks. The one that drives the Corvette? And that man that David used to could get candy from. Dean? Dean somebody.”

Mrs. Hilligiest was mildly concerned, but not enough to deliver an ultimatum. She knew her stern reputation around the neighborhood, and she could imagine no harm coming out of an infrequent friendly card game in the nearby home of a family they had known for fifteen years, or with the nice, polite young man who had once sold her a box of candy. “Just make sure you only play for fun, not money,” she admonished the boy.

A few days later Gregory dashed back from the Henleys’. “You know what Wayne told me?” he said in his high adolescent voice. “He said, ‘Greg, one of these days Dean and I are gonna have to take you fishin’.’”

The mother said nothing, but she made a mental note to reject any such invitations on her son’s behalf. Innocent card games might be acceptable, but she frowned on out-of-town trips unless the whole family went along.

One wet afternoon Mrs. Hilligiest dropped little Ronnie Henley off from school and Wayne was sitting on the front porch. He waved, stood up unsteadily, and called out, “Thankee, ma’am, for bringin’ mah brother home.”

“Glad to,” Mrs. Hilligiest said.

Wayne wobbled over to the car and Dorothy could tell that he was under a baleful influence. As though he had read her thoughts, Henley said, “Yes’m, I’ve drank a few beers, and I ’pologize.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “That’s your business.”

“Have y’all heard anythang about David?”

“No, not a word. Have you?”

“No’m.” The boy opened the door and slid inside, out of the drizzle. “I know how yew and Mr. Hilligiest feels, ma’am,” he said. His words were not easy to follow; the Henley clan was originally from the piney woods country, culturally the hillbilliest region of Texas, and Wayne spoke with deep drawls and slurs that

some (but never Dorothy Hilligiest) would have characterized as mush-mouthed, the more so when he had been drinking. “Ya know,” he went on, “I rilly, *rilly* feel, ya know, *sorry* for y’all, and mah heart jes’ goes out to yew.”

Mrs. Hilligiest thanked the boy for his sympathy.

“But ya know, ma’am”—Wayne pronounced it “may-em”—“I rilly don’t believe anythang’s happened to David.”

Dorothy was touched. The neighborhood was full of people who were beginning to think the Hilligiests were slightly dotty to press so stubborn a search at a time when teenagers were deserting their homes and flocking into communes and hitchhiking all over the continent without so much as a twinge of remorse about the generation they had left behind. Why must the Hilligiests act as though their own son would never have done such a thing, as though he were something special? But this deeply troubled half-drunken boy, with his disarmingly wispy moustache and his sad dark eyes, was doing his best to provide solace, and Dorothy appreciated it. “Well, Wayne,” she said softly, “I believe that in this length of time we should have heard something about David. I’ve always felt like that somebody in this Heights knows what happened. The answer’ll show up someday.”

“Well, ya know I put out the reward posters,” Henley said. “Quite a few of them. But David could still be rat around here. Sometimes the parents cain’t see the kids and the kids cain’t see the parents.”

“I don’t think he’s in Houston anywhere,” Dorothy said, “’cause somebody would tell us something. It’s been a long time now, Wayne. Whatever’s happened to him, kids are afraid to talk. The more time goes on, the more I think something bad musta happened.”

“Well, yes’m, but he could be rat under yer nose, too, and yew woultn’t even know it.”

“I hope that’s right,” Mrs. Hilligiest said. She patted his skinny arm. “I just hope that’s the way it is.”

RUBEN WATSON, A PALE TEENAGER with Cupid’s-bow lips and medium-long hair parted in the middle with geometrical precision, lived three blocks east of Heights Boulevard and a mile south of the Hilligiests and the Winkles. Like many boys in the waning neighborhood, he came from a broken home, and he had had his share of difficulties with juvenile authorities. But as the summer of 1971 began, the seventeen-year-old boy seemed to be maturing. His grandmother had bought him a new stereo and a whole new set of clothes, and for the moment he seemed content.

On Tuesday, August 17, eighty days after David Hilligiest and Malley Winkle had disappeared, Ruben asked his grandmother for money to go to an afternoon movie. She gave him two dollars and seventy-five cents to spend and a few extra dimes in case he had to use a pay phone. A short while later, the boy called his mother at work and told her he would see her at home when she got off at seven-thirty. Then he vanished from the earth.

Winter came and went, and one night an ambitious young man of eighteen years completed his shift at Long John Silver's restaurant on Yale Street. Frank Aguirre, slightly walleyed, with crow-black hair, was determined to finish high school, and he had just two months to go. He worked steadily, invested some of his money in a 1967 Rambler and put the rest aside. His girl friend, Rhonda Williams, was only fourteen, but the serious young man had already proposed marriage. His mother told him they were both too immature and urged him to finish school first and get a job. Frank accepted the advice and worked harder than ever.

On this evening of March 24, 1972, nearly ten months after the disappearance of Malley Winkle and David Hilligiest, Frank called home and reported that he would arrive by 10 P.M. AS usual, he tried to allay his mother's anxieties. "He would always let me know where he was and would knock on my door to let me know when he got home at night because he knew I would worry about him," she said. But that night he failed to knock, and the next morning he was still not home.

Young Aguirre and his family had lived earlier on Twenty-eighth Street, close to the Hilligiests and the Winkles and Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., and the boy had kept up his friendships in the area. Now the same teenage children who had been pondering the disappearance of the others talked about the newest departure. As before, there was immediate disdain for the runaway theory. "What could Frank do anyplace else that he couldn't do here?" asked seventeen-year-old Johnny Reyna. "And besides, him and Rhonda was gonna get married."

Rhonda Williams herself, a cherub with the face and figure of an early Brigitte Bardot, had waited inconsolably for word from her fiance, but there was neither message nor letter nor phone call. "Somethin' has to be wrong," the tearful girl told her friends.

A boy talked about Frank: "I used to borrow money from him and the next day he'd want it back. Why would a guy like that leave town without picking up his paycheck at Long John's? Why would a guy like that leave his car on the parking lot without ever coming back to get it?"

“It doesn’t make sense,” said a precocious girl named Sheila Hines, one of the leaders of the neighborhood teen society, and Rhonda’s best friend. Sheila pronounced final judgment on the matter: “Frank didn’t run away. Frank couldn’t do nothin’ like that to Rhonda. Somethin’ funny’s goin’ on.”

THE TEENAGE BOYS OF THE HEIGHTS were called names like Vernon, Greg, Marty, Ricky, Lamar, Ronnie or Wayne, less often old standards like John, James, William or Frank. There were hardly any Jonathans or Seans, Brads or Terences; these were considered too suburban, too precious. Every year a few old-fashioned names like Elmer, Chester, Homer and Ruben were preserved in birth records for another generation, and newborns were still tagged with agglutinations like Marty Ray, Johnny Ray and Frankie Ray, or Jim Bob, Jackie Lee and Billy Joe.

Most Heights boys dressed as plainly as their names, the common factor being a lack of funds. In schools like Alexander Hamilton Junior High, at the northern end of Heights Boulevard, the boys were as drab as the fifty-year-old building. Flashy dressers in platform soles and mod shirts and pimpish floppy hats were regarded as effeminate; teachers gave close attention to length of hair and considered a boy well attired if he wore clean jeans, Hush-puppy shoes or sneakers and a T-shirt with no more than a few holes. Form followed function, and function was the first consideration in all matters.

The boys of The Heights were more likely to express individuality in their bicycles, ranging from homemade models put together with spare parts and salvaged wire up to Peugeot ten-speed racers at a hundred and fifty dollars the copy. Some of the older boys had motor scooters and “choppers,” long stretched-out motorcycles, and at the top of the teenage society were aristocrats with old Fords and Chevrolets (called “Shivs”), clunker Buicks and Chryslers worth a few hundred dollars on used-car lots, or a rare Corvette or foreign sports car, usually on its last wheels and kept rolling only by the most sedulous attentions.

These creaking vehicles served as the rallying points of a highly mobile neighborhood youth culture. “On Saturday night we usually get in Vernon’s car and cruise down Yale to Houston Avenue,” a sixteen-year-old boy related. “There’d be maybe four or five of us, mostly boys, sometimes a girl if she was all right. We’d go over to Shepherd and all the way out towards Alabama, where there’s movies and drive-ins and a lot of kids. We’d just keep repeating that same drive over and over. All the people we know around here, if you want to meet ’em on Saturday night you just ride around like that, and in ten, fifteen minutes you’ll pass ’em all, and then you pull up and rap. ‘Hey, what’re y’all gonna do tonight?’ Stuff like that. Somebody’d say, ‘Come on, we cain’t sit here

and talk all night,' and we'd drive to the reservoir, seventeen miles out on the Katy Freeway, and sit around and talk some more and maybe have a beer and a red, but the sheriff wants you away from there by ten, so maybe we'd drive back to the freeway and race and drag and harse around. There's no speed cops to worry about. At midnight, we'd go to a movie, the Beatles, the Stones, Frankenstein, Godzilla, and pop a few more pills, and when the movie let out around two, we'd do some more cruising, see who was up, try to think of something else to do, and maybe pop a couple more pills and get a bite to eat. Usually we'd be nodding out on the backseat by then, and we'd go home around four or five in the morning nice and quiet and sleep till three."

Among the parents, there was a shortage of beneficent martinets like the Hilligiests, not because of disregard or callousness, but because life had simply worn most of them out. At heart, most Heights' parents were unpretentious country folk, engaged in a life-or-death struggle for existence in an alien place at a hectic time; they were in the city but not of it. The desideratum of their days was to snap open a can of Lone Star beer and watch *Hee Haw* or *Hawaii Five-O* or their own counterpart in the borough of Queens, Archie Bunker. Adversity had most of them by the throat; they reared their children as Geraldine Winkle did, improvising all the way, madly searching for trustworthy, low-cost baby-sitters and the money to pay them, keeping one eye open and one eye closed and praying to God that nothing went wrong. Like Mrs. Winkle, they recited reassuring litanies ("I raised Malley right, I was mother and father to him, I taught him right from wrong"), and like Mrs. Winkle they sometimes came home to find that the child was in jail, or gone for good.

The teenage culture in The Heights ran on pills—Seconal, Nembutal, phenobarbital, Quaalude, mostly barbiturates and tranquilizers but sometimes stimulants—washed down with beer or Coke. The children frowned on psychedelic drugs ("Too many bad trips, man!"), but marijuana was widely available, and the sniffing of acrylic paint was a popular new pastime. "You get a real quick high from acrylics," said a fourteen-year-old connoisseur. "You spray the can in a paper bag, and you stick your nose in and huff a few times and everythang's different. You talk funny, you don't know where you're at, sometimes you hear voices that ain't talkin'. When you wake up, you huff again, and you can keep up all night. One of my friends huffed for a whole day and night and he wasn't hurt a bit. But a twelve-year-old kid did some acrylics on Twenty-third Street and ran around tryin' to play football and collapsed and died. I guess you can get too much of anythang."

Acrylics rose in popularity because their possession was not a criminal offense,

and because the Houston police department opened up a fierce campaign against marijuana and pills. “It got hot out there, whoo-*ee!”* said a Heights boy. “The pigs was all over, lookin’ for dope, shakin’ kids down and stompin’ ’em and even plantin’ dope. Jeez Christ, you could rob a bank or beat up a old lady, but if you looked like you was holdin’ dope it was your ass.”

A trucker’s son, eighteen years old, complained, “The cops would come running out of their cars with guns drawn if we didn’t stop fast enough to suit them. Their idea of a crackdown was to beat up a bunch of teenage kids and plant dope on the hairiest ones. How could we complain? Who’s the public gonna believe, the cops or a bunch of punks from The Heights?”

Most of the children were already discontented. “We’re not all country hicks like our mothers and fathers,” said an excitable sixteen-year-old. “We’re not blind! They say, ‘Why don’t you go out and mow the lawn?’ and we say, ‘Mow the lawn? *Look at the neighborhood!’* We see it for what it is, but our parents still got it mixed up with their dreams. They give us shit like, ‘Just wait till you get to college, everything’ll brighten up.’ But we *know* we’re not going to college. No way! Who goes to college from The Heights? Kids around here go to work as busboys, waiters, laborers; some of them get into things like carpentry, Sheetrocking, chromeplating, roofing. After twelve years in school, we want out, not in!”

The unmotivated children turned quickly to anodyne and chemical thrills, and their habits could not be kept permanently from their families. “Yeh, they know about it, and we know they know,” the boy went on, “but we still got to get along, right? We still got to live together, and you can’t be fighting and screaming every second.”

In the short span of years between the naive era when Heights boys sinned with an occasional beer and the modern era when drugs and pills and cannabis became the *sine qua non* of juvenile social existence, certain subtle adjustments were worked out between the age groups. The parents, already troubled and semi-defeated, tacitly agreed to settle for a show of normalcy. “We try to be polite to ’em,” a boy explained. “We dress neat, we stay clean, we bring home part of our pay, we call our mothers ‘ma’am’ and our fathers ‘sir.’ We don’t let our hair grow too awful long, ’cause that *shows,* and we don’t run around with a bunch of Fu Manchu drug pushers. As long as we keep up appearances and don’t embarrass everybody, we can pop all the pills and smoke all the grass we want. As long as I don’t come home talking to somebody that isn’t there, they accept me. I *look* normal. And they’ll accept any of my friends that looks normal. They don’t rilly have that much choice. They can see what’s going on in the United

States, and they know I could get up in the morning and hitch all the way to California and they'd never see me again."

Parents and children played their verbal con games together, each contributing his own deception to the *pas de deux:*

"Gee, Mama, one of the boys had a red sleeping pill down at the playground today."

"Oh, that's terrible, son. I'm glad our fine boy doesn't fool around with nothing like that."

"No'm. I just walked away like you and Daddy told me."

The arrangement seemed neat and tidy; it was based entirely on appearances, and consonant with the cosmetic ethic of the supercity. False fronts were taken for true, artifice for reality, and a Gothic night drench of innocent corruption settled over the old neighborhood. In such gardens of expediency, strange weeds may grow.

NO ONE IN THE HEIGHTS knew precisely when Dean Corll returned to the friendly venues where once he had made divinity and played billiards, or if indeed he had ever left, and no one seemed to care. When he began turning up around Twenty-seventh Street, it was in the company of Wayne Henley and David Brooks, a tall teenager with a blond Prince Valiant hairdo and finely wrought features. Corll and the two boys made an unlikely trio; by the early 1970's, he was in his thirties, the boys in their mid-teens. They seemed to have nothing special in common. They rode around in Corll's white Ford Econoline van or sat on Henley's porch talking quietly and watching the passers-by.

"Dean must of rilly liked Wayne," said the talkative teenager Sheila Hines. "Why, Dean was good as *gold* to Wayne! Wayne would say, 'Take me here, take me there!' and Dean would take him anywhere he wanted to go." A carload of Heights children blew a tire twenty miles from town, and Wayne telephoned Corll and instructed him to rush a fresh tire to the scene. "Seems like Dean always jumped for David and Wayne," Sheila said. "But none of us thought nothin' about it at the time."

One day David Brooks showed up in the neighborhood with a gem of priceless beauty: a green 1969 Corvette. While the other children gaped and gawked, Wayne explained in a sullen voice that "Dean bought it for him; David practically lives off Dean." Seventeen-year-old Bruce Pittman was intrigued by the acquisition and offhandedly asked Brooks to explain. "I just scratched pennies for years," the taciturn blond boy answered. Bruce remained puzzled. David never seemed to hold a job; like Henley, he was a ninth-grade dropout,

and he was barely seventeen himself.

The Pittman boy was inquisitive, and one day he asked his friend Henley, “Why’re you and David always hanging around an old man like Dean?” Henley quickly changed the subject, and Bruce realized he had touched a nerve. “Wayne was always decent to me, a close friend,” the boy said later. “I decided that his other friends were his own business.”

To most of the people in The Heights, the odd trio was seen only as a hawk is sometimes seen in the woods: in quick silhouette, or as a subliminal shadow, swiftly past. Individually, Corll, Henley and Brooks maintained low profiles; they were regarded as losers, ciphers in the teenage society. As a threesome, the old mathematical precept applied: multiples of zero are zero. Corll could not even have been described as enigmatic, since no one cared enough to wonder about his *modus vivendi* or why he came around. The quiet, solidly built man with the dark eyes and the sharp, rabbity face seemed to crave anonymity. One young member of Henley’s local circle of friends had heard that Corll sometimes granted small loans, and made an impassioned appeal in person. “Dean sat there looking up at the ceiling, playing his radio, like he wasn’t listening,” the chagrined boy said. “He never even answered me!” Sometimes Henley or Brooks would make a cryptic remark, and Corll would grin warmly, as though sharing a secret memory. “You never knew what was behind their smiles,” a Heights boy said. “But who gave a shit?”

A girl friend of David Brooks came to know Dean Corll as well as any of the neighborhood females, and she found him cool and detached. “Dean didn’t want to get involved. He was just friendly enough to get by, to make you think he wasn’t a stick-in-the-mud, but not letting you get to know him. *Nobody* knew him except David and Wayne. Nobody ever talked about him or asked about him. No one would ever say, ‘Oh, have you seen Dean lately?’ Dean didn’t matter.”

If his personality did not seem overpowering to females, Corll, assisted by his two young helpmeets, found it easy to make friends with boys. “I met Dean at a store one day,” said a Heights teenager, “and he told me about a party he was gonna have. If I wasn’t working I’d a gone, ’cause I thought he was real nice. He said he was gonna have some dope, some beer, just about anything we wanted.”

Another boy said, “His parties were really far out. Everybody just totally got messed up. Everybody enjoyed it a lot, and never said anything about him being strange or having anything up his sleeve, just that he was real nice.”

Not every boy in The Heights attended the affairs. Close friends of Wayne

Henley, like Bruce Pittman and Johnny Reyna and Ricky Wilson, barely knew of the parties, and were seldom invited. One boy reflected later, “They seemed to invite kids they hardly knew, kids we didn’t even hang around with. Looking back, it seems odd—if you’re gonna have parties, why not invite your closest friends? But it’s just like so many other things that went down around here. They seem odd now, but at the time we didn’t give a particular shit. So Dean didn’t invite us to his dope parties? So what? We had parties of our own, every Saturday night in our cars.”

Parents of Heights boys were equally uninvolved in Dean Corll’s affairs. Said a father, “We did think he was a little old to be hangin’ with kids. He looked maybe twenty-five or twenty-six; we didn’t know he was really older’n that. But he was clean-cut, a nice polite young man, no hairs on his face or nothing radical. Didn’t cuss or act bad, and he’d help you out if you needed him, push your car or help you charge your battery, things like that. He was vanilla is what he was. What’s wrong with vanilla?” The appearance was acceptable. He had no beard.

Dozens of local boys found themselves bedazzled by such blandishments as “a ride in my van,” “a real groovy party,” “a fishing trip to the piney woods,” “wine and whiskey and beer,” especially since many of them cherished memories of the same kindly man stuffing candy into their pockets at the Helms Elementary School. Certain people were just put on earth to help others. “We thought that’s the way he got his kicks,” a boy said.

For a time, the parties were held in Dean’s apartment in Westcott Towers, a few blocks from The Heights. David and Wayne seemed to have the run of the small Corll apartment. A Westcott resident named Johnny Jones gained the impression that his next-door neighbors were two teenage boys and an adult man, since Brooks and Henley were there so often. “One time the guy with the long hair, Brooks, he brought over two girls,” Jones said, “and I told my wife, ‘Look, they’re making the old guy leave,’ ’cause the old guy left, and he looked kinda bad about it. He came back when the girls left.”

One afternoon Johnny Jones arrived home just as a screaming fire engine raced by the building. “Everybody next door ran out. There was two girls and two or three boys in there. They was scared it was the cops, but they laughed when it was the fire department.”

Soon Jones became aware that the oldest member of the group spent hours on the balcony, scanning the streets with binoculars. “I’d come home in the evening and he’d be standing there looking down the street, the same guy all the time,

tall, medium build, dark hair." On a Saturday afternoon Jones peered at the parking lot and saw three people fondling a medium-sized boa constrictor. Fascinated, he watched David Brooks stroke the snake, raise it to his lips and kiss it. "I don't know," the astonished man told his wife. "They don't seem like homosexuals to me, but they're sure weird. Anybody that'd kiss a snake …"

Early one morning, between two and four, Jones and his wife were awakened by loud noises from the next balcony. "We heard a lot of screaming, and somebody was beating their head against the wall and a guy hollering, 'Stop him! Stop him!' But you know, I never got out of my bed. I just thought somebody was tripping out on drugs and his friend was trying to help him or something."

Not long after, a maid at Westcott Towers complained to the manager, "I can't clean that apartment yet. I have to air it out first." A few days later, the place was vacant.

THE THREADBARE HOUSE at the corner of Fifteenth and Tulane, a mile south of the Hilligiests and the Winkles, had a permanent look of fatigue. The two-story frame building had been propped ad libitum on corner pilings that kept it from subsiding into the sand and muck of the yard. The paint was flaking; a Matterhorn of bald tires and metal junk lay at streetside; the broken rear axle of a truck collected rust in a garland of empty oilcans; and three elderly automobiles leaned on one another in the back, junked on the spot after their owner had flagged the last wracking cough out of them. A 1963 Mack truck with an open bed idled on the lawn, its Diesel engine shuddering and puffing like a wet bear; on the truck's doors someone had lettered, in the style of Halloween soap writing, G ONCALE 869 4247.

Gerald Oncale was a free-lance house mover who lived on leftovers, the jobs that larger firms disdained, and he knew that his combined home and business headquarters and truck pool did little to uphold the value of the carefully landscaped dwellings on the rest of the block. "I wisht I had time to worry about it," he said, "but all I do is work." He pronounced it "woik," as the word is pronounced in the Irish Channel of New Orleans, where Oncale was brought up. His labor force lounged about, taking a break. A slack-jawed white man puffed on an acrid cigar; two bony blacks in dirty undershirts sprawled almost flat under a dripping oak. Everyone seemed oblivious to the rain, falling with fury on the scene. Poor and vulnerable, they suffered larger pains.

"Johnny is my son," Gerald Oncale was saying. "I married my wife Eunice when the boy was nine months old, and I raised him just like my own flesh and blood. Johnny used to beg his mother, 'Let me change my name to Oncale,' but we

made him keep it Delome."

All together, the Oncales had six children, three from Eunice's first marriage and three from the union with Oncale, and they were reared impartially. A Heights house mover and handyman would never be rich, but there was always the good, simple food that Eunice Oncale had learned to cook back in Crowley, Louisiana, in the beans-and-rice country. She was a tiny woman with striking gray eyes, a thin pinched face and short black hair with white flecks; at forty-one, she was as petite as her husband was round. Gerald, a year younger, loved country food and beer, as his bulbous stomach attested. Too busy for fripperies, he usually needed a shave. His watery blue eyes seemed to fill his pop-bottle-thick lenses, and there were semipermanent calluses and grease stains on his gnarled hands and fingers. Gerald Oncale was as much a work machine as a hydraulic lift or a D-8 Cat; he regarded anything but labor as unmanly and time-consuming. His library consisted of a stack of *TV Guides*, and his talk usually revolved about such problems as the number of jacks involved in moving a three-story house from one part of Houston to the other.

"Johnny didn't like school," Eunice Oncale said. "He'd rather get out and work, like Gerald. He was always slow in learning; he failed his first year at Hamilton Junior High. When he wanted to quit, I told him, 'You're not gonna quit just to run the streets!' He said, 'Mom, you know I won't do nothing like that. I'm gonna work.' And he did, too, at a bakery. The people there liked him so much, well, one of the older men told Johnny if he went back and finished school he'd guarantee him a hundred dollars a week. That's how likable Johnny was. He'd never run off, not our Johnny."

"He bought clothes, never owed a debt," the boy's stepfather said. "He bought him a black light and paid for it with his own cash money, and he paid cash for a ten-speed. Johnny was a ve'y responsible kid."

The parents seldom discussed certain behavioral problems that surfaced when Johnny Delome was sixteen; they regarded them as transitory and petty, and as soon as the boy returned they would clear up the misunderstanding between generations. "It distoibed me that he was throwing his money around for the first time in his life," Gerald Oncale said. "One day he drew six weeks' pay that he'd saved up and went out and spent it. He hung around with a boy down the next street named Billy Baulch, a kid that didn't woik, and I could imagine where the money was going so fast. I said, 'Son, why do you want to spend your money like that?' I thought maybe he was buying dope for others, 'cause I knew Johnny would never use dope himself. One day I asked him flat out not to run with the Baulch kid no more, and Johnny got mad. Well, I was mad, too! Every time I'd

come home and say, ‘Where’s Johnny?’ Eunice’d say, ‘He just went to Billy’s for a few minutes.’ He wouldn’t stay home, and I’d tell Eunice, ‘Don’t let him go! I don’t want him down there,’ but she’d let him go anyway.”

One May morning, Johnny Delome was walking out the back door when Gerald noticed that the boy’s stark black hair was hanging over his ears. “Son!” he called. “Don’t leave just yet. We’re gonna get a haircut in a while.”

Later in the day, Eunice reported that Johnny was gone.

“Whattaya mean, ‘gone’?” Gerald said.

“He moved in with my sister.”

“*Just like that?* You let him move out?”

“Well, he didn’t wanna get his hair cut.”

Gerald Oncale was furious. “So you let him leave ’cause he didn’t want to get a haircut?” he said. He stomped outside in disgust.

Eunice Oncale’s sister lived a mile from the Oncale house. On Sunday, May 21, 1972, almost exactly a year after David Hilligiest and Malley Winkle had disappeared, she returned to her home to find that her nephew and his bike were gone.

At eleven that same Sunday morning, Johnny Delome bounced into the sparsely furnished living room of the Baulch residence on Sixteenth Street, three blocks from his own house. “Do you want breakfast, Johnny?” asked a smiling woman with brown hair bunned and tied against her head.

“I sure do, Mom,” the boy said. “I’m starving to death.” Johnny regularly called Janey Baulch “Mom,” and had even discussed moving in with the Baulches, but he was nervous about broaching the idea to Gerald Oncale, and the Baulches would not accept him without parental permission. Young Billy “Little Bill” Baulch, seventeen years old, a ruddy-complexioned boy with wavy hair the color of wheat, joined his pal after breakfast and the two decided to take a walk.

“Where y’all goin’?” Janey Baulch asked her son.

“Well, we’re just gonna git a Coke,” Little Bill said. “Do you have enough change for me to git a Coke?”

Mrs. Baulch plundered her purse and produced two dollars, all her silver. The family, plus Johnny Delome, planned to attend a drive-in movie that night, and she said, “Now don’t stay gone too long and have me worried about you! Don’t y’all be late!” The boys laughed and waved and were gone, leaving their bicycles parked outside.

Janey Baulch knew she had nothing to worry about. Little Bill sometimes rambled, but only with permission, and only after filing an estimated time of arrival and usually following it closely. The boy worshiped his father, Billy Gene, a swarthy cross-country truck driver and former cowboy from the Texas hill country near Waco. Whenever Billy Gene Baulch came back from one of his long trips, hauling Sheetrock for U.S. Gypsum Company, driving his eighteen-wheeled thirty-one-geared red-and-white tractor-tandem for ten hours on and eight hours off, Little Bill and his friend Johnny Delome would be waiting eagerly on the front porch of the fusty old bungalow. “They alius wanted me to load the boat and take ’em to the lake,” the forty-one-year-old father reminisced. “Hail far, that’s all they ever thought about! I’d be so tarred and give out I couldn’t hardly put one foot before the other’n, and they’d be waitin’, and which I went, too. They’d just set there on the front porch till I was ready, and I didn’t thank no more of taking Johnny than I did my own son. He was over here half the time anyway.”

With the two boys out for a Coke and her husband somewhere on the road, Janey Baulch straightened up the plain interior of the small house, turned on the battered air conditioner that sounded like a light plane warming up, and attended to the needs of her other four children. She was surprised that Little Bill and Johnny Delome were not back by late afternoon, but the movie started at dusk and there was still plenty of time. Young Billy was nervous at night; he suffered from a deep-seated fear of the dark. “Not that he was just scared of plain darkness,” his mother explained apologetically, “but the things that might be *in* the dark.” His fifteen-year-old brother, Michael Anthony “Tony” Baulch, was the mirror opposite; he seemed to crave carousing at all hours, gadding about the senescent neighborhood where his family had lived for twenty years. Tony had a tendency to disappear, and more than once his parents had reported him to police as a runaway. Tony bore more watching than Little Bill, but the parents tried to be extraprotective of both. Three years before, they had lost their oldest son in an automobile accident.

By nightfall, Billy and Johnny Delome had not returned, and Mrs. Baulch checked outside and saw that their bicycles were undisturbed; clearly they had planned no extended trip. The younger children were already complaining about being late for the movie, and Janey kept watching the clock and growing more anxious. Finally she left a note and a key in the mailbox and piled the children into the old family sedan.

A double feature was playing, but the preoccupied woman barely noticed. “I must of called home ten times durin’ that picture,” she said. “Up and down, up

and down, till I drove the other folks crazy. I was worried to death, and when the second feature started, I tole the kids, ‘Come own, we’re goin’!” Little Bill was the type of boy who phoned to apologize if he was going to be ten minutes late for dinner. Now it was pushing toward midnight, and something had to be wrong.

Janey waited by the phone into the next morning. When her road-weary husband pulled in, she told him, “Somethin’ bad’s happened to those boys. I can feel it. Somebody’s got ’em where they cain’t contact us.”

“It may be,” Billy Gene Baulch said. Life had conditioned him to expect the worst. “Little Bill sure ain’t the runnin’ kind.” When there was no word by the next morning, he called police and made a missing person’s report. On Wednesday, three days after the disappearance, the postman brought a letter from Madisonville, Texas, a small town about seventy miles north of Houston:

Dear Mom and Dad, I am sorry to do this, But Johnny and I found a better Job working for a trucker loading and unloading from Houston to Washington and we’ll be back in three to four Weeks. After a week I will send money to help You and Mom out. Love, Billy

“It don’t even *sound* like Little Bill,” Billy Gene Baulch said. “It don’t rang right at all.” He studied the letter. The small envelope was addressed in his son’s unmistakable childish scrawl, and was postmarked May 23, 1972, the day before. The note itself, on lined paper, seemed to be in a slightly different handwriting, as though someone had tried to imitate Little Bill’s hand, or as though the boy had written under abnormal conditions.

“Janey,” Billy Gene said, “nobody gets a job of loadin’ and unloadin’ on the road. *Nobody!* It don’t work that way. Different people load and unload at every stop, but never anybody on the truck. When you’re a trucker, you don’t touch a truck except’n to drive it, because if you do, you’ll be throwed out the gate.”

He asked his wife if anything untoward had happened on Sunday to upset the boys or make them angry. “Nothin’,” Mrs. Baulch said. “Not a single thing. They had a nice breakfast and they was lookin’ forward to the movie.”

“Did they take anythin’?”

“Just what they was wearin’.”

“I cain’t imagine them runnin’ away,” Billy Gene said. “They seemed so satisfied here, fishin’ and all.”

His wife started to cry. “I cain’t believe it either,” she said. “I’ll *never* believe it.” She composed herself and dialed Missing Persons to pass along the news

about the letter. After she had read it into the phone, the voice on the other end told her, “Well, if you’ve heard from him, he isn’t missing anymore. We’ll have to take him off our list.”

That same morning, Gerald and Eunice Oncale read a similar letter. Eunice mislaid it later, but she could recite it from memory:” ‘Mom, I’m sorry I left like I did, but I got a better job working on a truck loading and unloading from Houston to Washington. We should be back within three or four weeks. I’ll either call you or see you then. Love, Johnny.’”

Gerald noted that the letter was in Johnny’s handwriting, but Eunice saw something peculiar. “Gerald,” she said, “Johnny can’t write this good. Why, there’s not a misspelt word anywhere!” She told her husband she had a mother’s feeling that she might never see her son again.

Oncale flatly refused to believe that the boy was in trouble. “Just like all the rest of ’em nowadays,” he said. “He’s run away for a while. Can’t nobody keep track of ’em. He’ll be back when he gets an appetite.”

Summer passed, and Houston’s clammy winter began, and there was no word from either boy. One night Eunice’s sister picked up her ringing telephone and was told to stand by for a person-to-person call from Frankfurt, Germany. A voice came on the line and began talking like a phonograph record played at high speed, and the operator cut in and said she would try for a better connection. The sister waited, but there was no call-back. Later she told Gerald and Eunice, and they decided that Johnny must be in the Army in Germany. “That call couldn’t have come from anybody else,” Gerald insisted. “He’s alive, he’s okay, that’s the main thing!”

The Baulches took turns dialing anyone who might have a clue or a suggestion about Little Bill’s disappearance. Like Dorothy and Fred Hilligiest, undergoing their own quiet ordeal twelve blocks north, they examined their son’s background for clues, and like the Hilligiests they found nothing to suggest that he might have run away. “Little Bill was a steady boy,” Billy Gene said. “He wasn’t mixed up in the thangs that alius get boys in trouble. Why, he wouldn’t even touch a drank! When we’d be fishin’ out in the middle of the lake, I’d alius take along a few beers, which I have myself drank a little all my life, and I’ve offered it to him, and he’d say no thanks. *Out there dyin’ of thirst!* That’s how I know my son wouldn’t touch no alkeehol. I’d say, ‘Son, it’s wet, jes’ put a little in your mouth,’ and he’d say, ‘No, I don’t *wont* that stuff in my mouth.’ Wouldn’t take a swaller even.”

“He was the same about dope,” Janey Baulch said. “One time when he was

fifteen, two years before he went away, a blond-headed boy named David Brooks give him a capsule, and Billy brought it on home to me. Said, 'Hey, lookee here what David give me!' His dad wasn't in from work, and I just took that pill and I said, 'We'll dispose of this *rat cheer!'* And I flushed it down the commode. Then I called the police, and they sent a man from narcotics. He wrote everythin' down, and he tole Little Bill and I, he said, 'We have David Brooks on our list now, but we can't pick him up unless we catch him sellin' or passin' it to somebody.' The next time Brooks tried to give Little Bill some dope, we called headquarters and asked for the same detective, but they never could locate him. *Efficiency!* Little Bill tole me Brooks kept givin' those things out like candy, and the police never did nothin'."

The Baulches also had reason to remember David Brooks's close companion, Dean Corll, who once had been the subject of mild suspicion in the Baulch household. When Little Bill was eleven, he had roamed the streets looking for odd jobs, like most Heights boys, and one day he knocked on the door of a candy factory on Twenty-second street. A nondescript young man gave him candy to eat and candy to sell, door to door, and Little Bill ran seven blocks home to tell his parents. "He *give* you candy?" Billy Gene Baulch said. "Well, ain't that a little funny?"

"He gives it to all the kids," Little Bill said. "They come across the street from Helms school and he passes it out."

"Well, that's funnier still," his father said. "People just don't supply a whole school with candy, do they, son?"

A few years later, around the end of 1968, Little Bill came home out of breath and told his mother, "Mama, the man with the candy's living down the street! Dean! Dean Corll! He moved into 402."

"You mean that old barny-lookin' shed?" Mrs. Baulch asked.

"Well, it looks bad from the outside, but he's got it fixed up inside. He's got rugs, he's got TV and tape decks and stereo, and he's got those neat black lights. It's rilly fixed up nice, Mama. Airconditioned and all, and the place is wired so if anybody comes snooping around, a warning light goes on in Dean's bedroom."

One day Mrs. Baulch was introduced to the candyman on the street, and she was impressed by his genteel appearance. "When you go down there to play," she asked Little Bill later, "what do y'all do?"

"Oh, Mama, he's rilly good to me. He just *loves* children! He treats us just like a big brother."

“But what do you boys *do?”*

“We play the stereo and watch TV, and Dean shows us things. Once he showed us his handcuffs. We was there with a couple other boys, David Brooks and somebody else, and they got to playing around with the handcuffs and put ’em on one of the boys, and then Dean couldn’t find the key. He like to *never* found the key to take ’em off!”

When Janey Baulch discussed the incident with her husband, the ex-cowboy became disturbed. “I cain’t help how I feel,” he said. “It’s jes’ not normal for a man that old to be playin’ games with little boys.”

“Billy says they enjoy theirselves,” Mrs. Baulch said. “His heart’s gonna be broke if you tell him he cain’t go back.”

Billy Gene considered the problem. “Sometimes our boys look at me like I’m an old fogey and I don’t want ’em to have no friends,” he told his wife softly. “But I been around in this world, Janey, and I know it’s not natural to keep hangin’ with young kids. Back home on the ranch, why, that’d be a good way to get your head blowed off!”

“Billy says Dean’s good to ’em.”

“Yeh, maybe *too* good,” Billy Gene Baulch said. “Them’s the kind you gotta watch.” He ordered his children to stay away from the shed at 402 W. Sixteenth Street permanently.

Four years later, with their son mysteriously missing, the elder Baulches thought of Dean Corll again. They knew he had moved from the shed years before and they also knew that the candy factory was out of business. They seriously doubted that the candyman could help them, but with his wide circle of young friends he might be worth a call.

There was no listing under “Dean Corll” in the phone book or in the files of telephone information. “He used to be friendly with Betty Hawkins,” Janey Baulch said. She called up the young divorcee and was told that Betty seldom saw Dean anymore. “Betty said everytime she went over to his house to see him, he’d always have a bunch of boys hangin’ around,” Janey reported to her husband, “and whenever he’d come by her place, he’d have more boys hangin’ on him. She said she hasn’t seen him for a month or two, but he’s livin’ just off Washington Street. She’ll get the number and call us back.”

Around midnight, Betty Hawkins finally turned up the candyman’s latest unlisted number. Both Baulches spoke with him and both found him polite and sympathetic. He told them he had seen neither Billy Baulch nor Johnny Delome,

but he would check around and call back if he learned anything. He said if the boys had run away, it might be possible to get word to them to call home. The Baulches were grateful.

A few months later, fifteen-year-old Michael Anthony "Tony" Baulch, the family's sufferer from chronic wanderlust, went on one of his impromptu journeys. On a gray November morning, he returned as nonchalantly as he had left and told his mother and father that he had been working on a shrimp boat out of Delcambre, Louisiana. "Billy and Johnny were workin' on the same boat!" the boy said. "They're healthy, they're fine, so y'all can quit worryin'!"

The good news ended a turbulent time for Gerald and Eunice Oncale. "I done told you, didn't I?" Gerald exulted. "Nobody was gonna convince me that Johnny was gone for good." Gerald was weighed down with work and financial problems, as always, but Eunice drove straight to Delcambre, about two hundred miles away, to collect her son. She showed pictures to a fish wholesaler who identified the boy as a crewman on a shrimp boat—he thought it was the *McNeese*, under Captain Kirk. A waitress at Chico's seafood restaurant told Mrs. Oncale the boy had been in a few days before. "I said to myself, 'If there's a bakery, then Johnny's been there too,'" Eunice said, "cause he loves hot doughnuts. And sure enough, I found a bakery and the man looked at the picture real hard and he said, 'Yeh, that boy was here about two weeks ago. He told me he liked doughnuts, but he insisted on havin' 'em hot. Had on that same shirt.'" At about the same time, two boys matching the descriptions of Johnny Delome and Billy Baulch had walked into a Delcambre bar and asked permission to shoot pool. "I said, 'No minors allowed,'" the barmaid told Mrs. Oncale, "but it was them, all right."

Eunice returned to Houston reassured, and she and Gerald set about contacting marine telephone operators along the Gulf Coast, trying to find a *McNeese* or a Captain Kirk. They called Biloxi, Dulac, Empire, Grand Isle, Venice, Pointe a la Hache and Delcambre, but the more long-distance calls they placed, the more elusive the boys and the *McNeese* became. Gerald Oncale drove to Delcambre and began a boat-by-boat check along the waterfront. A crewman told him that a boy who looked exactly like Johnny Delome had signed on a shrimp boat called the *Narisso, Narcisso*, or something similar. Later Gerald watched *Tugboat Annie* on television, "and the name of her boat was *Narcissus.* I figured that was *too* big a coincidence. I figured somebody was trying to tell me that I was on the right track, that Johnny was okay."

He went back to the Delcambre residents Eunice had already seen and reconfirmed their stories. To some, he applied heavy verbal pressure. "One ol'

boy almost wanted to fight me. He finally said, 'Man, I done *tole* ya for the last time: *I seen your son!* Now why don't you believe me?' He got hot!" Gerald felt encouraged.

But in Houston, Eunice Oncale received a dismaying report from Mrs. Billy Gene Baulch. Young Tony Baulch, the original bearer of the good news about Johnny and Little Bill, had made a confession. He said he had hated to see his parents suffering over his brother's absence and he had made up the story to console them. "It wasn't nothin' but a little white lie," Janey Baulch told Mrs. Oncale. "I cain't tell you how sorry I am. The boy meant well."

When Gerald returned from Louisiana, he was not to be dissuaded. "Tony Baulch was lyin', all right," Oncale said, "but not about working with Johnny and Billy. When he found out I was gonna go over to Delcambre and catch 'em, he changed his story. He didn't want me finding 'em, that's why he changed. That's the only way I can see it happening."

He resumed his dogged search.

THE HILLIGIEST AND WINKLE CHILDREN HAD DISAPPEARED from the Heights in May, 1971, Ruben Watson in August of the same year, Frank Aguirre seven months later in March, 1972, and the Baulch and Delome boys two months after that. The summer of 1972 passed uneventfully, and on the second day of October, with the coming of fall making temperatures plummet into the sixties and seventies, a sweet-faced fourteen-year-old boy named Wally Jay Simoneaux, scion of Louisiana Cajuns, left his house in The Heights to spend the night with Richard Hembree, a shy thirteen-year-old who lived a few blocks away. Just after dark, a friend saw the two boys in a white vehicle parked in front of a grocery store, but when he tried to engage them in conversation another boy got out and said "Beat it!"

Later that night the phone rang in the Simoneaux house on Twenty-fourth Street. Wally Jay's voice said "Mama—" and then there was silence.

"Darlin'," Mrs. Simoneaux said. "Where are you, darlin'?"

There was a shuffling noise in the background, and then a click, and the line went dead. The disturbed mother phoned the Hembree residence and found that both boys were late and unaccounted for. When Mrs. Simoneaux called police, she was told that the boys would be stopped and questioned if they were seen on the streets.

Nearly three more months passed. Then on December 22, 1972, an eighteen-year-old problem child named Mark Scott told his parents he was going to Mexico for a few days to forget his troubles. In his latest entanglement with the

law, Mark had been arrested and charged with carrying a knife. A few years before, he had stayed overnight with a blond boy named David Brooks, and Brooks had accidentally shot him with a pellet gun; the tiny cylinder of lead had been dug out of Mark's leg in a hospital emergency room. Young Scott occasionally traveled with another juvenile offender and close friend of the pistol-packing Brooks: Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr. The Henley boy had shown up at one of Mark Scott's parties and had become enshrined in Scott family history as "the first to arrive and the last to leave."

A week after Mark Scott's departure for Mexico, his parents studied a card with an Austin postmark:

How are you doing? I am in Austin for a couple of days. I found a good job. I am making $3 an hour. I'll be home when I get enough money to pay my lawyer.

The weeks went by and there was no further word.

TO MOST OF THE HEIGHTS CHILDREN, it seemed that the brooding Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., "just up and disappeared" around March of 1973, but his friend Bruce Pittman knew better. "He's gone to Mount Pleasant to live a new life," Bruce told the other boys. "He's got him a job in a filling station. His daddy lives there now, and Wayne's decided to be a regular country-town boy from now on. It won't take." Young Pittman was right. A month or two after leaving the clangorous city of Houston "for the absolute last time," Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., was back in his mother's house, and soon he had returned to the company of the quiet David Brooks and the even quieter Dean Corll.

"Seems like they had a regular program," said Johnny Reyna, who lived a block from Henley. "Every afternoon, Wayne'd sit at Hart's, the fried-chicken place near Hamilton Junior High, but you wouldn't see him talking to none of the older kids. He was always rapping with the seventh-graders, him and David Brooks and sometimes Dean. They was there just about every day after school."

For years, the Henley home on Twenty-seventh Street had been presided over by Wayne's cheerful mother, Mary, who worked days as a cashier, and his spry grandmother, Christine Weed, and the two pleasant ladies made everyone welcome. "We'd go over to the Henleys' just to listen to the radio, and to have someplace to go, you know?" Johnny Reyna said. "'Cause there's rilly nothing to do around here. Just go and sit someplace. And Miz Henley and Miz Weed, they was real nice."

In the early evenings of spring 1973, the visitors found that Dean Corll was likely to appear at the Henley residence; he would pull up in his white Ford van as though arriving from work and enter the house in his customary cloud of

silence. “He’d never say nothin’ to the rest of us,” said Sheila Hines. “I first met him in June; we were sittin’ in Wayne’s and Dean come up in his van, and we all sat around rappin’, but Dean didn’t say nothin’, ya know? He just looked at everybody. He gave me weird vibrations because of the way he’d stare, just sittin’ back and starin’ while we all talked. He didn’t react to anythin’ that was goin’ on. I’d say ‘Hi’ to him, and he wouldn’t even answer. He was like the walkin’ dead in the movies. He was just-well-takin’ up space. The rest of us would get ready to boogie off, and Wayne and Dean and David’d get in the van and split somewhere else.”

One evening the neighborhood gang was assembled in Wayne’s living room when little Ronnie Henley shouted “Hey, Dean!” and snapped a flashbulb picture of the startled man. “Dean freaked out!” Johnny Reyna said. “You could tell when the picture was developed how freaked he was: his eyes was all bugged and weird. Later the kid tried to take another picture, but Dean squirmed all over the place. He hid his face; he held his hand up to where Ronnie couldn’t take it. I kind of wondered why he didn’t want his picture taken, but I didn’t ask nothing.”

The perceptive Bruce Pittman sensed undercurrents, but he had decided months before not to bother his troubled friend Henley about the relationship with Corll. “By this time I was pretty sure Dean was a homosexual,” Bruce said. “I mean, he didn’t have feminine actions or a feminine voice, but he was messing around with a couple of seventeen-year-old boys, always giving ’em money, takin’ ’em places. Why would a normal thirty-three-year-old man act like that? You never saw him with chicks. He’d sit in Wayne’s living room and look us over, and then he’d go into the bedroom with Wayne and come back out and stare some more. If Dean had anything to say, it was strictly at Wayne, not another soul. You might could get a ‘hello’ outa him, but that was the extent of it.”

Early on a humid afternoon, young Pittman and Wayne Henley mounted their ten-speed bikes and pedaled toward a nearby pool hall, and on the way Wayne called out, “Hey, Bruce, what would yew think about bein’ a professional assassin?”

“A *what?”* Bruce said.

“A hired killer, like for the Mafia or somethin’.”

Bruce glanced over at his friend, expecting to see a grin or a smirk, but Wayne looked serious.

“Man, that’s a silly question!” the preacher’s son said. “Man, that’s *stupid!* I could never kill anybody.” He studied Wayne again. The boy’s face was intense,

as though he were deep in thought. Bruce put the incident down to “just dreaming, the way all of us do once in a while,” and the subject was dropped.

In June, somebody noticed that another regular playmate had stopped coming around, and for a time children like Johnny Reyna and Sheila Hines wondered what had happened. The absent boy was Billy Lawrence, fifteen years old, six feet tall and a football player at Booker T. Washington Junior High School. Billy and his father lived together on Thirty-first Street, across the Belt Freeway from the Henleys and the Hilligiests and the rest, and in a different school district. “Man, he hated that school!” a neighborhood boy exclaimed. “He’d always come down here and play with us, and all he could talk about was the niggers at Booker T. He got beat up by ’em one time, but he’d been down on ’em long before that. Every time we’d see him he’d talk about how bad they were, how much he hated ’em, and we got tired of hearin’ the same old broken record, ya know? So we began tunin’ him out.”

“Billy never was that happy,” another boy said. “He did a lot of bitchin’ about his old man, same as everybody else. Billy wanted to smoke grass and fool around, and his old man wouldn’t let him, and they had some pretty bad scenes. So he wasn’t gettin’ along at home and he wasn’t gettin’ along at school and after a while he wasn’t gettin’ along with us, either. He’d come down to get us and we’d be gone. The pigs were watching this neighborhood, so we’d just boogie off to the country in somebody’s car, and by the time Billy got here from Booker T., we’d be long gone, and he got to thinkin’ we were avoidin’ him.”

Just after school recessed for the summer, the Lawrence boy knocked on the door of Sheila Hines’s house on Twenty-sixth Street and told her he was feeling depressed. “I think I might just go and disappear for a while,” he said disconsolately.

“Where?” Sheila said.

“I don’t know. A different neighborhood or somethin’.”

“Why?” Sheila asked. “Do ya think we don’t want ya around?”

“I don’t know, but when I gotta think about something, I just go off by myself. I’ll be gone for a while, but I’ll be back.”

“Well, come on by when ya do!” Sheila said cheerfully. “We’re always glad to see ya, Billy.”

Horace James “Jimmy” Lawrence, a beefy forty-six-year-old mailroom worker for the Houston *Post*, rattled around the empty house on Thirty-first Street cursing cockroaches and missing his son. In morose moments, Jimmy seemed to

himself the personification of the hillbilly song “Born to Lose.” His father had been a millionaire who, in Jimmy’s words, “mint hiss’f on wine, women and song,” and abandoned his children to orphans’ homes. As a young man, Jimmy married a beautiful and tortured woman who required steady injections of morphine; he was prevailed upon to stick up groceries and drugstores to meet her needs. In prison in 1947, he heard from his dissolute old father: “I don’t want a criminal in my home, so when you get out, don’t bother visiting.” The twenty-two months behind bars were traumatic: “I saw awful thangs. I saw homosexuals. I saw a man kilt; his head fell in my lap in the lunchroom. I had nightmar’s and I attempted suicide. Somebody give me a Bible in solitary, and I found the Lard. He changed my whole life. I got out, I worked hard, I got pardoned by the governor, and I married a fine, fine lady that give me two fine sons, Billy and my older son Jimmy. In 1965, she got cancer, and she was in such pain, I went into a chapel at the hospital and fell down on my knees and I said, ‘Lard, if it be Thy will, take her to You,’ and a few days later, He done took her to His side.”

Jimmy went back to the bungalow on Thirty-first Street, back to the flowered yard with its banana and mulberry trees and “the only pink magnolia in this whole community,” and concentrated on his boys. Young Jimmy passed into manhood and moved away, and Billy went to junior high school and made the football team. “He belonged to the church and he served as a acrolyte, similar to a altar boy,” Jimmy said proudly, “and he accepted Jesus Christ as his savior.”

Sometimes Billy would join his father on the evening shift at the *Post,* earning twenty or twenty-five dollars mailing newspapers out of town, but mostly he went his way unsupervised while his father worked evenings. “That was the trouble, I guess,” Jimmy Lawrence said. “He begun hanging with a kid named Wayne Henley and a couple others I didn’t like. That Henley, he been in this house two, three times that I know of. One afternoon I went off and left my shop keys on the dresser, and when I come back, I could smell incense. Once before I’d caught Billy smoking marijuana and he’d turned on the air conditioner right quick to draw the fumes out, but this time I come right in on ’em, Billy and Henley and a couple more, and I knocked the shit outa my boy. One of ’em others started coming at me and he wound up falling through that plastic partition there; that’s why it’s gashed open now. I grabbed Billy by the head—he had long hair, plenty to hold on to—and I took him into the bathroom and made him flush that dope down the drain. It was a baggie, what they call a lid. Not real good marijuana; I myse’f seen better. I slapped him, and we had some words, and he kicked at me, so I hauled off and hit him again. It hurt me, having to

manhandle my own son like that."

For a time, the chastened boy stayed out of trouble. He contracted to buy a ten-speed bicycle for a hundred and five dollars and worked hard to make the payments. He spent more evenings working with his father and sometimes his older brother, and he found a steady girl friend, a woman of twenty. His father said, "I coulda gone for her myse'f! One time I said, 'Son, dirty old men need loving too!'" Sitting in his empty house telling the story, Jimmy Lawrence broke into an asthmatic laugh at his own cherished mot.

"But purty soon he begin having trouble at school," the father went on. "It was the black kids to blame. He'd come home with his face cut, but he didn't want to talk about it. One day him and another boy was riding their bicycles, and two nigger youths approached 'em with a gun and stole the bikes. Never seen 'em again, and Billy still had to pay off the contract."

The boy began playing hooky. "I went to school to try to help him out once in a while, but it wasn't much use. I could see he was slipping away. But still a mighty fine son, a mighty fine boy, big and good-looking, a hundred and sixty pounds, almost too big to give a licking anymore."

On Monday, June 4, 1973, two years after the first disappearance in the old neighborhood, father and son were at home together in the afternoon. Jimmy zipped up his one-piece work suit, and Billy said, "How about giving me a lift down to the corner, Daddy?"

"Why, sure, son," Jimmy said. "Let's go."

They drove slowly along the narrow street flanked by wide expanses of dark-green lawn on both sides, and Billy said, "Daddy, you'll be having a birthday next month. What do you want me to git you?"

"Well, son, whatever you want, whatever your little heart desires," Jimmy said. "It's not the gift, but the thought."

At the corner of Thirty-first and Yale, Billy began running up the street. "I love you!" Jimmy shouted. "See you in the morning." It was his habit, ever since his sons had lost their mother, to remind them of his love at every opportunity.

Around ten that night, busy running the big Cutler machine in the mailroom of the *Post*, Jimmy was summoned to the phone. "Daddy," Billy pleaded, "could I *please* go fishin' up at Lake Sam Rayburn?"

"Well, it sounds okay to me," Jimmy said. "Who with?"

"Oh, just some friends."

Jimmy was tempted to ask for a name or two, but he had vivid memories of

earlier arguments with his son about prying. The boy hated to be interrogated about friends and friendships. Jimmy said, “When’ll you be back, son?”

“Oh, two, three days,” Billy said. “Maybe Thursday.”

“Well, enjoy yourse’f, son,” Jimmy said, “and remember, I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” Billy said.

Thursday came and went, and there was no sign of the boy. Jimmy fretted, but he accepted the mobility of the younger generation, and he was not seriously upset. On the morning of Saturday, June 9, five days after his last conversation with Billy, the father opened a letter postmarked in Austin the day before. In familiar handwriting, Billy had written:

Dear Daddy,

I have decided to go to Austin because I have a good job offier, I am sorry that I decided to leave but I just had to go.

P.S. I will be back in late Aug. Hope you understand, but I had to go. Daddy, I hope you know I love you. Your son, Billy

Nearly a month went by without word, and on July 2 someone telephoned and asked if Billy was at home. “He’s working in Austin,” Jimmy said. “Who’s this?”

“Wayne.”

“Well, he’s gone for the summer. He won’t be back till school.”

Two evenings later, while Jimmy Lawrence was wrapping and mailing newspapers, burglars broke into his home and stole his guns, his asthma medicine, cameras, young Billy’s stereo and a strongbox filled with papers and mementos. “It was someone that knew the house,” Jimmy told the police. “Someone that knew my habits. They broke a glass in the side door, and they just come right in.” He neglected to mention to the officers that his son Billy was unaccounted for. “That didn’t seem to have nothing to do with it,” he said later. “Not right then.”

BY THIS SAME JULY, 1973, young Billy Baulch had been absent for over a year, “working for a trucker loading and unloading from Houston to Washington,” a job that his truck-driving father knew did not exist. “By then we was doin’ a lotta waitin’ and hopin’,” the elder Baulch said in his hill-country drawl. “I’d gave up on the police a long time ago. I dialed that phone till I got to whar’ I was ashamed to call ’em anymore, and they jes’ talked to me like I was a idiot.”

It was consoling that Michael Anthony “Tony” Baulch, Billy’s foot-loose

younger brother, seemed to be settling down. “We were happy about Tony,” Janey Baulch said. “He’d wander every once in a while, but he’d never be gone long without callin’ us, so we knew where he was at.”

“He’d get to missin’ us,” Billy Gene Baulch said, “and he’d have to hear our voice. We wasn’t worried about Tony anymore.”

On Thursday, July 19, six weeks after Billy Lawrence had accepted “a good job offier” in Austin, Mrs. Baulch suggested to Tony that he get a haircut. “His hair was comin’ down over his ears,” the mother said, “and I tole him to get it trimmed up, but he could leave it long to a certain extent. I knew he had to get some of that hair cut off if he was gonna stay around here.”

The boy asked his mother for enough money to pay for the haircut and a pack of cigarets, and walked out, apparently in a reasonable mood. When he failed to return that night or the next, Billy Gene told his wife that he was worried.

“Well, why, Billy?” Janey asked. “He’s run before.”

“This time’s different,” the cowboy truck driver said. “The boy’s too well contented. Why, Janey, he’s *happy* here. You can see it all over him.”

They surveyed Tony’s room. “See that?” Billy Gene said. “He left all his clothes hangin’. Did he ever do that when he run before? Lookee, there’s the new shoes his grandma bought him. Would he leave them behind? They ain’t never even been wore.”

Wearily, Billy Gene called the police, but Tony had left home so many times he was already listed in police files as a runaway. “The cops just said, ‘Well, what do you want *us* to do?’” Billy Gene told his wife. “I just said I wanted ’em to do their job.”

On his days off, Baulch would make up excuses for leaving the house, and then scour the neighborhood for his missing sons. “I knew all the places kids normally would go, but I never seen nothin’ nor heard nothin’ about either one. That was somethin’ different from the other times Tony run away, too. Just fadin’ like that. It wasn’t like Tony a bit.” The father checked with the Coast Guard, thinking that Tony might have gone shrimping again, but the Coast Guard said they had no record of a crewman named Baulch. He wrote to Social Security officials to see if regular payments were being made to his sons’ accounts, but there was no answer. The suffocating July dragged on, and Billy Gene began to get a feeling of helplessness. “Nothin’ worked,” he said. “Nothin’ helped a tiny bit. Everywhar’ I looked, *nothin’*. I was losin’ my oldest sons, one by one. Marvin that was kilt in the car accident, Billy, and now Tony. Lucky we had two more, and I told my wife, I said, ‘Janey, I cain’t seem to get one raised

up. Now you'll just have to take special keer,' which Janey give her promise."

THE HILLIGIESTS had been searching without relief for two years, but by the summer of 1973 they were as confused and frustrated as the others. One dark afternoon, Dorothy Hilligiest was visited by Christine Weed, the grandmother who years before had trundled little Wayne Henley down to the Hilligiest house for supervised playtime with David. Mrs. Weed was always welcome. Nearly sixty, she drove her rattletrap sedan all over Houston; she was busy, alert and friendly, and Mrs. Hilligiest enjoyed their talks. It was through Christine Weed that she had learned of the disappearance of several neighborhood boys. "Seems like they're all runnin' away nowadays," Mrs. Weed had said, and Mrs. Hilligiest had noted, just for the record, that there was no evidence whatever that young David had run away. Mrs. Weed had nodded.

On this sultry day in July, with bilious storm clouds touching the tops of the massive oaks along Twenty-seventh Street, Wayne Henley's grandmother arranged herself primly on one of the two overstuffed sofas in the Hilligiests' immaculate living room and began talking. "I been sittin' around listenin' to the kids," she said. "Did you know Tony Baulch is missin' now? Did you know the Baulch boys?"

Dorothy said she did not know them personally.

"Well, Tony Baulch, he was at our house a few weeks before he disappeared," Mrs. Weed went on. "He come around to ask if we'd seen his older brother. You know—Billy? The one that's been missin' a year? Well, right after that, Tony disappeared himself, and he hasn't been seen since. Why, it's gettin' to be a neighborhood without boys!"

Mrs. Hilligiest said she had felt that way for two years.

CHARLES COBBLE, a blue-eyed bean pole with fine light hair, walked with a shambling, stoop-shouldered gait that seemed to diminish him. "He slank around here as though he didn't want to be no trouble," a neighbor said. "It was like he was scared to disturb your attention." Charles was five feet ten inches in height, tall for a growing boy, but no one thought of him as tall; indeed, hardly anyone thought of him at all. The other children called him "loser" to his face; to adults, he barely existed. Like so many of the young men in The Heights, he was a high school dropout, his relations with his family were strained, and his life was bleak and unrewarding. "My son very seldom smiled," said forty-six-year-old Betty Cobble, a tiny, forceful red-haired woman who was brought up in The Heights and spoke in the "raised" intonations, almost Cockney, of the native Houstonian. "He was a sad-lookin' boy. We never knew what to do to make him happy, and

we tried every single dye of his life."

Betty and her husband, Vern, a forty-five-year-old postal supervisor with a soft voice and a retiring nature, had reared three daughters smoothly, but their youngest child was always a problem. "Oh, he was stubborn!" the diminutive mother said. "Just like me. We had to move twice when he was little to get him away from bad boys and girls. Once we moved because I overheard a phone call from another little boy tellin' Charles about these little girls and what all they would do. I gave Charles a really bad spankin' and we moved that weekend. This put him in a new school and separated him from his old friends and more or less kept him isolated, and it probably did him a lot of horm." Betty Cobble was always critical of herself, and never more than when she was discussing her son. "Charles was very bright, extremely bright, but I doubt if he ever went one full week to school. If he was gonna be lite, he wouldn't go. He didn't want to walk in lite in front of the other students; he said the teacher would holler at him. One dye in the fifth grade, I was drivin' him to school, and as we got closer, he cried louder and louder. He said, 'Don't stop, Mama! *Please* don't stop!' When we got near the school, he grabbed the wheel of the car and almost made me go in a ditch. I said, 'I'm not stoppin'! *I'm not stoppin'!* I'm gonna tyke you back home!' He'd get so upset he'd get diarrhea, or he'd throw up. I just didn't know *what* to do, and I guess a lot of the things I did were wrong."

The Cobbles took their son to psychologists and psychiatrists, to guidance centers and behavioral clinics. "We found he was deathly afraid I was gonna leave him," Mrs. Cobble recalled. "I don't know what on earth gave him that idea. Maybe it was because I'm not well; I've been in the hospital a lot. Maybe he thought I was gonna die. It's my nerves. I used to have severe headaches all the time, till they put me on Dilantin. I've been on it steady for eight years. My brain wave is similar to epilepsy."

Whatever the cause, Charles Cobble went through life on the edge of panic. "There was *nothing* he wasn't afraid of," an uncle said. "He was afraid of the water, he was afraid of the dark, he was afraid of people and dogs. Nobody liked him, and he knew it, because they made it obvious to him. My mother, Charles' grandmother, is a real termagant, very outspoken, and she made it plain to Charles that she didn't like him. So did my father. The truth is, Charles wasn't much of a boy. He'd throw tantrums, and nineteen times in a row he'd get his way, and the twentieth time Betty would hit him hard. I'm afraid she was overprotective of him."

Betty Cobble admitted that "maybe I overloved him, maybe I tried too hard. But Charles always suffered from a feelin' that nobody loved him. A few months

before he went away, he told me, ‘I might as well be dead.’ I was walkin’ out of his room at the time; he never would go to sleep without me tellin’ him good night, and if I were mad at him, I’d still have to go in and talk to him. So this night I turned around and walked back in and sat on his bed. I said, ‘Charles, you surely can’t believe that I don’t love you.’

“He said, ‘Well, maybe *you* do.’

“I said, ‘Well, what about your sister?’

” ‘Yeh,’ he said, ‘Donna loves me, but you and Donna are the only ones, and nobody else.’”

By the tenth grade, the boy had all but stopped attending classes. “His grades were down,” Betty said. “He wouldn’t do his homework. He’d stay home and watch TV all dye, sit around and play cards, and the doctor said he was on the verge of an ulcer. So we let him quit school at sixteen.”

One night Charles brought home a new friend. “Mama,” the boy said, “this is Marty Ray Jones.” Betty Cobble shook hands with a wide-smiling boy who resembled her son, with blue eyes and blond hair and a well-groomed exterior. Marty Ray Jones was short, about five feet five inches, but the two boys seemed almost equal in height because of Charles’s tendency to cower and stoop. Charles took his mother aside and said, “Marty’s had a hard life, Mama. His mother’s been married three or four times and he had a stepfather that beat him so bad he had to be taken to the hospital, and his real father’s remarried and they don’t get along too good and Marty Ray wants to stay overnight.”

“Stay overnight?” Mrs. Cobble said. “Why, Charles, he’s a stranger!”

“Well, he’s already checked with his daddy and it’s okay.”

Marty Ray Jones stayed Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and then went back to his father’s house to pick up fresh clothing. “Charles,” Betty Cobble said, “do you realize Marty’s movin’ in?”

“Yeh, well, it does look that way,” the boy said.

“Well, he has to go home! He can’t stay with us.” But in fact he could. The Cobbles had a four-bedroom house, large by contemporary Heights standards, and Betty Cobble had made a career of taking in “the strays and the strange,” as she put it herself.

“Once I counted and we had eleven children livin’ in our house, and only four of ’em were ours. A woman at Child Guidance had the nerve to tell me I had an earth-mother complex. That great big old fat thang told *me* that!”

Marty Ray Jones, the boy who came to dinner, began a tumultuous eighteen

months under the Cobbles' roof. "He had charm, he was funny, you could talk and life with him about anythang," Betty Cobble said, "and I learned to love that child as my own. But I should have thrown him out the first day. He was deeply emotionally disturbed. I took him to a psychiatric clinic and they gave him bottles of tranquilizers, which he sold. The next time I took him they gave him ninety more, and he told me he could get to feelin' pretty good by tykin' four of 'em."

Before long, the Cobbles were aware that Marty Jones took more than tranquilizers. He was a heavy user of barbiturates and stimulants and marijuana, and they had reason to believe he experimented with other potions, perhaps heroin and cocaine, still relatively uncommon in the backward neighborhood. When they realized that they were harboring an incipient addict, the Cobbles packed Marty's bags and deposited them on the front porch.

"That was all right with him," Mrs. Cobble said. "He'd just sleep out there till we let him back in. Then he'd do some outrageous thang and we'd take all his clothes down to his father's house and empty 'em at the door, and the next morning we'd find Marty asleep in the backseat of our car. He was just beyond control. His father couldn't handle him and neither could anybody else. His father said it was the mother's fault, and the mother said it was the father's, and meanwhile he was livin' in our house. There'd be times when Marty and Charles would be so mad at each other they wouldn't even be speakin', and still Charles would beg us to let him stay because he said Marty had no plice to go. Charles knew what it was like to be an outcast, and he had a deep sensitivity about thangs like that. We tried to make the best of it. I drove those two boys everywhere in the car, and I'd go back and pick 'em up. I don't know what more we could have done."

One night Marty came home to the Cobbles' in a wild and manic state. "He was on somethin' worse than marijuana," Betty Cobble said. "He insisted on drivin' our car, and we wouldn't let him, so he began goin' through my daughter's purse to find the keys. Marty was very quick goin' through purses. All you had to do was turn your back for a second and he'd have a ten-dollar bill. He was death on ten-dollar bills, because you could buy a lid for ten dollars.

"When he couldn't find the keys, he began ravin' and threatenin'. I said, 'Marty, you better calm yourself or I'm gonna have to call the police." He picked up a mortar block and threw it through the rear window of the Mustang, and I said, 'Okay, I'm callin' 'em!' Marty sat on the front porch and waited.

"The police came and told him to stand up. Marty wouldn't move, so one big

cop grabbed him and jerked him to his feet. Marty started screamin' 'Police brutality! Police brutality!' so the whole neighborhood could hear, but the cops were very good to him, considerin' how he was actin'. They handcuffed him, and Marty turned to me and said, 'Are you gonna let 'em treat me like this?'

"I said, 'He's not doin' anythang to hurt you. And it's your own fault.' By that time he was pleadin' and cryin'. They took him away, and I went to bed after midnight. When I got up at seven the next mornin', about the time Vern usually gets home from the post office, Marty was sittin' on the couch in our livin' room.

"I said, 'Marty, how did you get out?'

"He said, 'Oh, my dad came down and got me.'"

In police records, the first mention of Marty Ray Jones was at age six, as the complainant in a sodomy case. In 1972, the year of the window-breaking incident, he was seventeen and on probation for theft. His lifelong behavior had alternated between acts of furious delinquency and mournful contrition. He stole Vern Cobble's antique gold watch and later gave him a worn old time-piece with gold-plated case, purchased at a pawnshop for thirty dollars. After he had caused Betty Cobble untold misery, he bought her a ceramic elephant and presented it on her birthday with quiet pride. "He made it so hord for us," Mrs. Cobble said, "because he was tryin' to be liked, and at the same time makin' everybody mad. He was a companion to Charles, yes, but my God, look what it cost Charles in the long run!"

In March, 1973, there were changes in the lives of the Cobbles and their bad-penny houseguest. Betty flew to Massachusetts to help one of her daughters through a difficult pregnancy, and Marty Ray moved in with a succession of hosts ranging from his mother and latest stepfather in Brownwood, Texas, to a dope dealer called "Satan" in the scabrous section of Houston called "Sin Alley." Vern Cobble, the quiet man who worked at night and let his wife run the family, grew closer to his son Charles. "For the first time in his life," Cobble said, "Charles would ask me questions, solicit my advice, and for the first time in his life he'd take it. Up to then, he'd been his mother's boy, mainly because I wasn't around much—I always had to hold two jobs, sometimes three, till I made supervisor. But with Betty gone to Massachusetts, Charles and I became friends, and it felt good. I think he was surprised how much I'd learned about life in the last year!"

One night Charles dragged home another waif, a tiny fifteen-year-old girl with orange hair and a doll's face on which she had appliquéd heavy portions of

rouge and lipstick and eye cosmetics. “This here’s Debbie,” Charles told his father. “She’s a beautician, and she’s working as a waitress on Yale Street. We’re gonna have a baby.”

Surprised at his own cool sophistication, Vern Cobble arranged a marriage and helped the newlyweds set up housekeeping in the Ben Hur Apartments, twelve blocks away, just across the street from the home of Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., and a block from the Hilligiests. When Betty returned from the East, the elder Cobbles gave up their rambling old house and joined their son at the Ben Hur. Once again the seventeen-year-old boy and his mother were close, four doors apart on the second floor, overlooking the little swimming pool.

Only a few months passed before the child Debbie, not yet five feet in height, became disenchanted. “For a while, it was nice,” she said. “Charles got a job in the nickel-plating shop on Twenty-sixth Street, but then he quit because he was scared of his boss. He’d sit around the apartment and ask me to tell him I loved him, over and over and over and over and over. He felt that everybody else resented him. Then one day Marty Jones came back and started hanging around. Marty always brought marijuana, and he’d get Charles to go places with him, and Charles would come home in bad shape, spaced out, drugged, or drunk, and in a bad mood. Charles wouldn’t talk to me about it. He said that Marty was the only real friend he’d ever had; he said they tried to help each other. I asked him not to bring Marty back, but he said Marty didn’t have anyplace else to go.”

After a few months, the young married couple separated. “Charles just told me, ‘It’d be for your own good if you went away. I don’t want you to get hurt.’ He said he’d send for me when the time was right. That was the Fourth of July, and as soon as I moved out, Marty moved in.”

By this time, Marty Ray Jones had become known throughout The Heights as a smalltime supplier of narcotics, and also as a “burn” artist—a peddler who takes the money and fails to produce the goods, or substitutes dope of a low quality. With faithful Charles at his side, the Jones boy managed to alienate the whole neighborhood, including the young man who lived across the street, Wayne Henley. Eighteen-year-old Johnny Reyna recalled, “One night in the middle of July we were at Long John’s fish place, and Marty came in looking for a fight. He went up to Wayne and tried to start something, but Wayne just threw it off. Marty was getting real redneck, real mean, but nobody wanted to hassle with him. Charles was there; he was acting okay. You could talk to Charles, but not to Marty.”

A boy named Danny Ward remembered: “Marty and Charles, they tried to start a

fight with everybody. Like Marty came up to the Jack-in-the-Box and asked me if I wanted to step outside and fight him. I told him no. Then I whipped his ass." All along Twenty-seventh Street and Yale Street and Heights Boulevard, every place where teenagers congregated, Marty Ray Jones and his shadow, Charles Cobble, became anathema.

At noon on Wednesday, July 25, a steaming summer day in Houston, Betty Cobble drove home from her new job making deliveries for a Heights florist. As usual, she stopped by apartment No. 26 to invite her son to join her for lunch. Mother and son ate together in the parents' apartment, No. 30; then Betty returned to her route.

A few hours later, Charles was seen cooling off in the small pool in the Ben Hur's courtyard, and toward the end of the day he and Marty made an appearance at Long John's in their fanciest outfits, including new platform-sole shoes. "They was rappin'," Sheila Hines said. "Nothin' out of the way. If they woulda said somethin' to me and Rhonda Williams about goin' away, we wouldn't've been so surprised later. But they didn't. They just walked in and rapped a little bit and said they had to go and take care of some stuff."

Mrs. Cobble dropped into her son's apartment when she finished work late that afternoon, but neither Charles nor Marty was at home. She served dinner, and her husband, Vern, left for the post office about 9 P.M. Once again Betty looked into No. 26 and saw no signs of life. She returned to her own apartment to await the ten o'clock news on television.

Down in the courtyard, a Ben Hur resident sat by the small swimming pool, hoping to catch a breeze on the sweltering evening. It was just before 10 P.M., and like Betty Cobble she intended to watch the news in a few minutes. "I was looking at the water, deep in my own thoughts," the woman said, "and I was startled by footsteps behind me. Three boys were walking over by the sidewalk one behind the other: Marty Jones first, then Charles Cobble, then another boy with a moustache, not a heavy moustache, but definitely a moustache. They got to the lights by the pool and Charles looked over and gave me a real weird look. I didn't know whether it was a look of 'Don't speak to me' or 'For heaven's sake, say something!' I just can't describe the look; it's bothered me ever since. Normally Charles would have said hello, but this time he said nothing. Nobody said anything, and they just kept marching single file. They turned the corner out of my sight and my second thought was that they were going up to Charles' apartment for another pot party. I tried to put it out of my mind, but that look stayed with me. It was as if Charles was trying to plead with me with his eyes."

Later Johnny Reyna and two of his friends drove along Twenty-seventh and spotted a stiff procession. “They were walkin’ toward Wayne’s house, Marty and Charles walkin’ ahead of Wayne,” Johnny said. “We stopped and started talkin’ to ’em and they didn’t want to say nothin’. Wayne kind of turned us off. Normally he’d come over and talk, ya know? So we drove off.”

At 10:30 P.M., when the evening newscast was over, Betty Cobble retraced the four doors to her son’s apartment to see if he had arrived home, but the place was dark. “I stayed up till after *The Virginian,”* she said, “and went down again and they still weren’t there. That’s when I began to worry. They didn’t usually stay out lite like that, not without callin’ me to come pick ’em up, no matter what time it was. I went to bed, but I didn’t sleep much, and at six in the mornin’ I went back again, and they weren’t home and their beds weren’t slept in. When Vern came in at seven, I said, ‘Charles and Marty didn’t come home last night.’ I told him to call me at the flower shop if they showed up.”

Vern Cobble knew that the boys roamed all night every now and then, even though his wife was unaware of it, and he thought they would probably tiptoe back any second. In an hour, Charles was scheduled to begin helping a neighbor move, and the boy was usually dependable about such matters. When eight o’clock arrived and the neighbor pounded on the door and said the boys were not home, Cobble began to wonder. “But then I said to myself, ‘Now look! Charles is seventeen years old, out on his own, earning his own money. You can’t tie a boy down to where he’s got to account for every minute of his life.’ And I decided to just stay calm and forget about it. We’d done enough worrying about Charles, and all we got out of it was a worried boy.”

At 9:50 A.M. the phone rang and daughter Emily answered. Charles was on the line, asking first for his mother and then for Vern.

“Daddy?” the boy asked in a shrill voice.

“Yes?” Vern answered.

“I’m in real serious trouble!” Charles’s voice was broken and shaking. The child who was afraid of everything was terrified again.

“Well, what’s the matter, Charles?”

“I can’t tell you,” the boy said. He wrenched the words out between spasms and gulps. “There’s some—people that think—we’ve—we’ve done something to them.”

“What are you talking about?” Vern asked, taking pains not to raise his voice.

“I *cain’t* tell you,” Charles insisted.

If the boy was in trouble, his father figured, Marty Ray Jones must have something to do with it. “Where’s Marty?” he asked.

“He’s here with me.”

Vern spoke with deliberate gentleness. “Charles,” he said, “what’s going on? What’s the situation?”

The boy began to cry convulsively. “Daddy,” he said between sobs, “I have—I have to—I have to have a thousand dollars.”

Cobble tried not to sound shocked. “Charles,” he said evenly, “I don’t have that kind of money here. It’d take time to get something like that.”

The boy’s voice became insistent. “But, Daddy, I’ve *got* to have it!”

“Then I’ll have to raise it,” Vern Cobble said quickly. “I haven’t got that kind of money here. I’ll have to see about it.”

“Well, if you cain’t do it yourself, talk to Mr. Rogers. Maybe he can help?”

Before Vern could say another word, he heard voices in the background, and then Charles spoke in a strangely resigned and depressed tone, as though he had given up hope. “I’ll tell you later where you have to have the money,” he mumbled. The connection was broken.

Cobble put down the phone and found that he was trembling. Charles had sounded so forlorn, so helpless. The whole conversation was beyond comprehension; it fitted in with nothing in the gentle father’s placid background; it found him unprepared, bewildered. Who was “Mr. Rogers”? Vern knew no one of that name. There were a few rich members in the Cobble family. Why had Charles cited the mysterious Mr. Rogers and not the wealthy relatives?

Vern Cobble dialed the Houston police and a dispatcher asked if he wanted a squad car. “No, I don’t want to talk to any patrol officers,” Vern said. “I want to get somebody investigating on this.”

He was put through to homicide, and he told about the telephone call and his son’s terror. “I can guarantee you, officer,” Vern Cobble said, “my son’s not the type to be gone like this.”

The homicide detective told him, “There’s nothing we can do.”

“What?” Vern said. He thought he had misunderstood.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the officer said, “but on the strength of what you’ve told me, there hasn’t actually been any crime committed. If somebody else called and said he was holding your son, that’d be different. We could say the boy was being held unlawfully. But it’s possible he’s just trying to raise money to go to

California or someplace. Boys do that, you know."

"Not Charles!" Cobble said emphatically. The idea of his timorous son embarking for California was too outlandish to merit discussion. "He wouldn't go anywhere, I'm positive of that."

"Well, the only thing I can do is let you talk to Missing Persons."

The father waited impatiently for the new connection. Maybe Missing Persons was the right department. Charles was certainly missing, and these detectives would have experience in hunting lost and endangered people. He outlined the situation once again, and said, "When can you start looking?"

"Oh, we don't look for missing people," a policeman said. "We just take the information and if we come across 'em we let you know."

"Well, that's not what I want!" Vern snapped. "These boys are in trouble. I could tell the way my son talked, he's in *serious* trouble!"

The officer said he was sorry, but there was no possibility of assigning anyone to the case. "There's too many like this. We couldn't handle 'em all."

A thoroughly confused Vern Cobble hung up the phone, then phoned Marty Ray Jones's father, a former country-and-western singer who now ran a gas station. Yes, Marty had called with a similar request, and "Tex" Jones was as much in the dark as Cobble. Vern dialed the FBI and was informed that there was no apparent violation of federal law. The FBI man recommended that he try the Houston police department.

All day Vern Cobble waited for Charles to call him back and tell him how to deliver the money. He checked his bank balance and found he had two hundred dollars. He called the federal credit union and asked for a loan of eight hundred more. "No problem," a clerk said. "What's it for?"

Vern mumbled something about his son being in trouble. "Oh," the clerk said. "Then you need it for legal fees?"

"Yes," the father said. "Just put down 'Legal fees.'"

That night, the Cobbles stayed by the phone, exactly as their neighbors at the next corner, the Hilligiests, had waited two summers before. Periodically they called the police to ask if there was any word and to solicit assistance; the police were respectful, courteous and indifferent. By the third day, both Betty and Vern had come to the conclusion that the boys were probably dead. "Charles just wouldn't do us that way," Mrs. Cobble said later. "It wasn't in his character." Said her husband: "Our hope was that they *had* run away, but it didn't add up. Those boys had their own apartment, their own money, their own stereo; they

had everything two boys could want, and there was no pressure from the family or anything. Why, the outside world's a tough place; would they run from something good to something bad? I tried to make that point to the police, but they didn't get it."

The desperate parents conceived a desperate plan. If they could find narcotics in Apartment 26, perhaps they could force police to enter the case. "We might get Charles in trouble, too," Betty said, "but at least somebody'd be out lookin'."

They ransacked the apartment and came up with some hypodermic needles and smoking masks, used to concentrate marijuana fumes. Betty Cobble had high hopes, but they were quickly dashed by the gruff tone of a police captain's voice. "Listen, lady," he said, "I understand you already have somebody out looking for these boys."

Betty said that she had asked her brother Chester Doby for help, but that his resources were limited. She described the paraphernalia in her son's apartment and inquired when she could expect narcotics detectives to arrive. "Well, *you're* the one that found the stuff," the captain said. "You'll have to come on down and file charges yourself."

"You're not even gonna come and look?" Betty asked.

"No," the captain replied. "*We* didn't find anything, *you* did."

Mrs. Cobble said, "But you didn't even look."

"Well, you've already got your brother out looking, don't you, lady?" the captain said. He sounded deeply offended.

Something snapped in the overwrought mother. "Listen here!" she shouted. "You don't have to keep callin' me 'lady'! My name's Mrs. Cobble."

"Well, I don't know *who* you are," the captain said curtly. "You're just a voice on the telephone to me."

The upshot of the acrimonious conversation was that the indomitable Betty Cobble won her point, or appeared to. A team of narcotics detectives arrived, combed the apartment and found three needles, two masks and a pipe. "Sorry, ma'am," one of them said as he was leaving. "We can't file any charges on this."

"Does that mean you're not gonna look for the boys?" Betty asked.

"Oh, yeh," the detective said consolingly. "We'll find 'em."

By August 1, a week after the disappearance, Betty's brother Chester Doby had talked to dozens of Heights children, tracked lead after lead, and achieved nothing. The former CIA operative, a physical reincarnation of Vincent van

Gogh, down to the last red wisp of beard, was a rare-book dealer, but he had dropped everything to look for his nephew. He agreed with the unmentionable conviction that the boys were probably dead—"Neither one could have stayed away three days without help, because neither one was man enough to make it on his own"—but he plodded ahead anyway, uncertain of his motivation. "Partly it was to help my sister feel better," he explained. "Partly it was because I was curious, and I guess partly I was mad. I'm not religious like Vern and Betty. I believe in vengeance." With a wink from police, Doby wore a snub-nosed .38 in his belt, and had no compunction about using it.

"From the beginning I took the approach that maybe the boys *had* stolen something or burned somebody and that they really did owe a thousand dollars," Doby said. "I had to find out who they owed, and I must have talked to every kid in the neighborhood. I know I talked to Wayne Henley two, three times, and he was just like all the rest—cooperative, sympathetic and a blank wall.

"So I spread the word—'Anybody that can find out who we owe the money to, let us know, and we'll pay the thousand and a fifty-dollar finder's fee on top of it, no names, no checks, and no questions asked.' I made it plain that we were interested in Charles only. I said they could keep Marty, and I meant it, because I knew that if these boys had gotten themselves in deep trouble, it had to be because of Marty. I already knew some of his habits, but out on the streets I learned more: he was a rip-off artist, a sadist and probably a queer. It was a bad day for everybody when Charles dragged him home."

Even in this neighborhood of relatively poor people and money-hungry teenagers, there was no response to the offer. Doby broadened his investigation and picked up bits of information on several other missing boys, including one who had telephoned his parents for five hundred dollars and then had vanished. Nobody remembered the boy's name, and the police had no such information in their files. Doby turned to the only clue in Charles's final telephone call: the name "Rogers." He knew that a man with that name was one of the city's major narcotics wholesalers. Doby tried to reach Rogers and in the process was shot at and nearly run down by a truck. He put out feelers for an informer and addict named Kelly Davis, but a few nights later Davis was found dead in Matamoros, Mexico, shot in the head. Chester Doby was aware that he was accidentally stirring up narcotics circles in Houston, but he was getting no closer to solving the original case.

Meanwhile, the taciturn Vern Cobble was making an investigation of his own, prowling the neighborhood and ringing doorbells. He learned quickly that there was an insidious pattern in The Heights. "The very first day that I went out

looking for Charles," the father said, "I talked to a man that said, 'Well, these aren't the only boys that disappeared.' He told me about David Hilligiest and Malley Winkle, and he said it was weird the way boys were dropping out of sight."

Each day the Cobbles or Chester Doby called Missing Persons to keep the officers posted on their latest finds, and each day the information was taken without comment. "Then I began asking them what *they* had learned," Vern Cobble said, "and they'd read back out of their file the same stuff I'd given them the day before! I'd say, 'Look, these boys aren't regular runaways. They would *never* stay out on their own; they're in trouble.' And they'd say 'Thank you very much' and tell me they were working hard on the case and read me some other piece of information that maybe Chester'd given them three days earlier. That made me mad! Not at the officers, no. It's the system that's bad." Vern began visiting the homicide division almost daily, trying to stir up interest in the case.

A week after the disappearance, two young plain-clothes men knocked at the door of the Cobbles' apartment. By now it was August; temperatures and humidity approached the one-hundred mark every day, and Houstonians sweated and griped and sought the solace of ice-cold beer. The rookies worked hard. "We learned to admire them," Vern Cobble said. "They hadn't even been assigned, but they'd seen the report lying around at homicide for all that time, and they just took an interest." Against all hope, the Cobbles were reassured.

HIS YOUNG FRIENDS WERE GROWING more and more worried about Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr. Sometimes he was drunk, often he was irritable, and sometimes he seemed to react out of proportion to reality. "Like on the Fourth of July, ya know?" Sheila Hines said. "Wayne told us he was goin' over to Dean Corll's for a little-bitty party and we could all come along and shoot fireworks and drank wine and stuff, ya know? We told him we had somethin' else planned, but he kep' on and kep' on and *kep'* on! 'Y'all kin come over! We'll have fun! Dean has a whole house over in Pasadena, and there's a bayou in the back, and we kin shoot fireworks *all day long!* And it's cool, eve'ythang's cool, ya know?' He just *wouldn't* take no for an answer, and we finally just turned him off. We couldn't understand why it was so important to him, but that's how Wayne was gettin' these days: all upset over nothin'."

Bruce Pittman, closer to the Henley boy than most of the others, mentioned nonchalantly one day, "Hey, where's Billy Lawrence been? You seen him?"

Henley blurted a sharp "No!" and abruptly switched to a different subject. Pittman began to wonder again. When friendly remarks were made, Wayne

acted as though he were under attack, and changed the subject or impulsively popped open another beer.

Some of the group thought that the boy might have been let down by the departure of his crony David Brooks. The blond eighteen-year-old Brooks had married a pretty girl named Bridget, and the newlyweds were expecting a baby. Brooks hardly ever drove his green Corvette into the shady old neighborhood anymore, and young Henley could be seen sitting around killing time till late in the afternoons, when his faithful friend Dean Corll would usually arrive in his white Ford van. Twice young Henley bestirred himself to walk a half block to the Methodist church and discuss family problems with his minister, but the rest of the time he appeared phlegmatic and immobile, lost in his own world, drowning in beer. "He was puttin' away *tons* of that stuff," said Sheila Hines, "and he was worried about it hisself. He said he wanted to find a doctor that'd help him kick the habit. One morning a few of us was walkin' down the street, and Wayne was up on his porch, and he told us he'd been drankin' on one single beer for an hour, makin' it last. He was real excited about that. We went inside and sat around his livin' room and a couple boys started a game of chess, but Wayne was too nervous, and he kep' talkin' about goin' to the doctor to see about his beer problem. He couldn't sit still; his hands were shakin' and he was talkin' and chatterin' away. We knew somethin' besides beer had to be wrong, but we didn't know what."

On August 4, nearly two weeks after the disappearance of Charles Cobble and Marty Ray Jones, Wayne invited Bruce Pittman to an old-fashioned country weekend in the Henleys' ancestral home town of Mount Pleasant, near the Texas border with Arkansas and Oklahoma. The boys swam in the town pool Saturday night and then settled into a late session of Mexican Sweat, a local variant of poker. Bruce lost all his money and five borrowed dollars and climbed into bed. Early Sunday morning, Henley and one of his cousins woke the boy and announced they were going after rabbits. The hunters sighted no game bigger than a mockingbird and ended up firing two boxes of .22 ammunition at bottles and cans. They tried a few sips of "white lightning" and bought a bottle to take back home. And Wayne babbled incessantly about his latest ambition.

"He told me Houston was as good as any other town, but the best place was Australia," Bruce said. "He told me he'd pay my way to go with him, seventeen hundred dollars, counting the money I'd need to qualify as a homesteader. He said I could pay him back later. He said it was worth it to have a friend with him. I looked at him and he was serious. It was just like the time he asked me if I could ever be a Mafia assassin. He said he'd been doing a lot of reading about

the old West, and Australia sounded like the same thang to him. I wondered where he would get that kind of money, seventeen hundred for me and seventeen hundred for himself, but he said he had it already. I guess I shoulda realized something was going on. Most of us kids, we never seen that much money in our life. It had to be coming from somewhere. But where? The Henleys, they was poor folks."

The view from The Heights was still obscure.

Awakening

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

—Luke 12:2-3

WHEN RHONDA WILLIAMS STROLLED on the streets of The Heights, impetuous young drivers slammed on their brakes and stared. At fifteen, Rhonda was petite, with an open, girlish face and chestnut hair that streamed down her back and a figure that was already close to maturity. The pretty gamine lived on Twenty-third Street, not far from Wayne Henley and the other members of the Twenty-seventh Street group, in a sagging old house out of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee or almost any short story by Eudora Welty. Junk and worn-out housewares were strewn about the creaking porch, and the front door was usually agape, so that visitors simply walked in and announced their arrival, boardinghouse style.

The father, Ben Williams, disapproved of most of Rhonda's playmates, and there was frequent bickering. Said a friend, "Whenever you visited Rhonda, old Ben'd come into the room every few minutes and say, 'What's that smell? WHAT'S THAT SMAYELL?'" Ben Williams had not yet come to terms with the pot-and-pill culture.

Rhonda's mother was dead. The story in the neighborhood was that she had placed her three small daughters in the bathtub one morning and started hanging out the wash. When an hour passed, Rhonda's six-year-old sister went outside and found her mother dead of a heart attack. For years afterward (the story went on) the children would climb into the tub and meditate about their mother, as though they could somehow reverse history by reconstructing the incident. By the time the oldest daughter was eighteen, she had borne three children. Another daughter married and moved away, and Rhonda, the youngest, endured her own tragedy—the juvenile love affair, at age fourteen, with Frank Aguirre. For months after Aguirre's disappearance in March, 1972, the child had brooded. A year and a half later, she was still having spells of serious despondency. "That chick *rilly* loved that dude," said her confidante, Sheila Hines. "That was the

love that comes once in a lifetime, ya know? Romeo and Juliet, ya know? She'll *never* get over it."

Rhonda Williams traveled in a subgroup that rode in Ricky Wilson's old sedan and consisted of Sheila, Ricky, Johnny Reyna and several others, all of them friends or former friends of Wayne Henley. The sullen young beer drinker had often joined them on nocturnal circuit rides around the sultry streets of The Heights, but lately he had become almost sedentary, sitting at home except when he disappeared with Dean Corll late in the afternoons.

Henley had not been around on the evening when Rhonda had had the accident that laid her up for a while. Ricky Wilson had been pushing another car with his own, and the playful Rhonda had insisted on sitting on the hood of his car. "Just make sure you don't get your feet in between the cars!" Ricky had warned. Rhonda had not made sure, and several small bones were crunched.

By the stuffy night of Tuesday, August 7, two weeks after the disappearance of Charles Cobble and Marty Jones, Rhonda was growing more and more aggrieved and aggravated. Confined to the old house, her aching foot propped on its heavy splint, she brooded over the fact that no one came to comfort her. Some of her friends stayed away because Ben Williams made them nervous, and others because he had banned them from his premises. Whatever the reason, Rhonda felt discarded. An argument broke out with her father, and soon it grew loud and physical. Rhonda cried and clomped back to her room and vowed to run away.

Around midnight, she telephoned Sheila Hines and sobbed out her plans. The two agreed that whatever happened, Rhonda must avoid Sheila's house. "This'd be the first place he'd come lookin'," Sheila advised. Rhonda said she would not stay another night in her own house, even if she had to sleep in the streets, and broke off the conversation crying almost hysterically.

She was still red-eyed and quivering when seventeen-year-old Ricky Wilson arrived to offer consolation. But Rhonda would not be comforted. She said it appeared that none of her friends missed her, nobody cared about her. "Why, you're the first one that's been here in days!" she cried. "I sit here all by myself. Nobody likes me. *Nobody!"* She wailed louder than ever.

As they talked, shuffling sounds were heard from the front of the house, and the lonesome girl welcomed her second visitor of the post-midnight hours. Wayne Henley wobbled in with a shy smile and a wave of the hand. His brown hair was damp and awry; his acne-scarred face gleamed with beads of sweat and he reeked of beer. He walked in a sailor's unsteady roll and flopped on the bed. In his customary gargled dialect, he said he had walked the five blocks to the

Williams' house "to see how y'uz comin' along, see what I kin do for ya."

Rhonda responded with another flood of tears. "I'm gonna die," she said. "I'm just gonna die!"

"Don't die, Rhonda," Wayne said gently. "I want yew to live for a long time."

The troubled child was touched. She hopped over to the bed and hugged Henley, then impulsively embraced Ricky Wilson. She told her two friends, "Y'all make me feel better."

At 1:30 A.M., Wayne Henley woke up his mother to tell her he was going to spend the night with a young friend, Timothy Cordell Kerley. He stepped outside to Kerley's car, and together with a limping Rhonda Williams, they sped down the Gulf Freeway to the suburb of Pasadena and began nosing around an intricate network of curving, darkened streets. An hour after leaving The Heights, they pulled up at a small one-story house and got out, and the black Texas night enfolded them.

At 8:24 A.M., a telephone operator at Pasadena police headquarters heard a quavery male voice say, "Y'all better come rat now. I kilt a man. The address is twenty-twenty Lamar."

Minutes later, Pasadena police pulled up at a sun-bleached olive-and-white bungalow in a fairly young neighborhood of twenty-and thirty-thousand-dollar homes. The air was heavy with a smell like sour milk, Pasadena's permanent impost for living off the petroleum industry. The house sat behind a postage-stamp lawn on a fraction of an acre, with a fenced backyard and the muddy Vince Bayou to its rear. Most of the landscaping was losing its vitality; the place looked like a family home after the family's spark and drive have ebbed. Two stuporous young men and a half-dressed teen-age girl sat on the front stoop.

"In there," one of the young men mumbled, beckoning toward the door.

The policemen stepped into the house and found the naked body of a man stretched full length on the beige carpet. The vital signs were gone; the mouth was puffed out and the face was swollen and caked with blood. There appeared to be five or six bullet holes in the chest and back. The body lay on its left side, nose to baseboard, right shoulder leaning against the wall, right foot intersecting a loose telephone cord that snaked between the toes.

The man looked about six feet tall, not fat but puffy and soft, with pale skin and flaccid musculature. His brown hair was swirled in flattened wisps and arcs, as though styled and then slept on; it was graying at the back and temples. Blood-flecked sideburns reached just short of the base of each ear. The facial features

were distorted behind their hardening mask of blood, but the man seemed average in appearance, with a thick nose and wide-set eyes that stared glassily at the wall a few inches away.

The body was measured and photographed and dispatched to the morgue, the three young people were taken to Pasadena police headquarters for questioning, and teams of detectives and crime technicians began working through the house inch by inch. They found a bedroom that had been arranged as though for Satanic rites. The rug was covered with sheets of heavy-gauge clear plastic, apparently to protect against drippings. A single bed was rumpled, the covers tangled and mixed with the sheets; one pillow was on the bed and several smaller ones on the floor, as though the sleeper had flung them about in a nightmare. A blue-and-white bedspread was crumpled up alongside a seven-by-three-foot slab of thick unpainted plywood, strong and barely flexible. At the four corners of the slab, holes had been drilled; two sets of handcuffs were linked to two of the holes, and nylon ropes were threaded through the others. Each of the two ropes led to another set of handcuffs lying on the floor a few feet away. At the top of the board, there was a small orange puff-pillow and a strong, thin loop of cord.

Off to the side, atop the plastic sheeting, lay a hunting knife and its scabbard. An open paper bag held a can of acrylic paint that gave off a faint smell reminiscent of banana oil. A military-type gas mask lay near the bed. A portable radio was rigged to a pair of dry cells, giving it increased volume and power, and a vacuum cleaner was plugged in at the wall. Men’s clothing was strewn about, and there was a wide roll of clear plastic of the same type that covered the floor.

The investigators found the house strangely empty and hollow, with only the most rudimentary furniture, and speculated that the occupant was in the process of moving out or moving in. A few books were toppled on a shelf, next to a well-thumbed copy of *Human Sexuality*. There were several thin glass tubes and a double-headed plastic dildo of seventeen inches. The nearly empty bedroom was decorated by a colorful poster with a Jesus-like image on it. The caption was “LOVE.”

In the driveway, police found a white 1972 Ford Econoline van, rigged so that the entire rear portion could be sealed off by opaque navy-blue curtains. On the floor was a loose swatch of beige rug, and in the middle of the van was an upraised box with a drawer opening into its bottom and dark-blue padding on top, as though to provide an extra seat atop the storage space. Rings and hooks protruded from pegboard walls, and binoculars and another portable radio were found just behind the driver’s seat along with tools and maps and fifteen feet of

new nylon rope.

In the fenced backyard, police opened a locked shed and found a similar box, this one with air holes cut into the sides. It was made of unpainted half-inch plywood and measured thirty-four inches high, twenty-four wide and thirty deep. It was hinged in front, and it closed with a hasp. A detective felt around inside and extracted what appeared to be a few strands of human hair. “Anybody that climbed in here,” he said, shaking his head, “he’d have to be all doubled over.” There was no sign of blood.

While police technicians continued their work, a few curious neighbors assembled on the sidewalk and talked to detectives and the press. They said that the house had been built around 1950, and that a quiet electrician named Arnold Corll, a man in his mid-fifties, had lived in the place for most of that time. “He minded his own business and he was the type of guy if you needed some help he would be willin’,” a man said.

Another added plaintively, “Mr. Corll had an unhappy life himself. He lost a wife to some disease, had a tough time. Seems like some people just don’t carry a horseshoe with ’em. And now this. He don’t need it. And he’s a good churchgoing man, too.”

Some of the neighbors pointed to the tangled vines and shrubs in the front yard and to the grass that needed mowing. “Been that way since Mr. Corll moved away a while back, and his son moved in,” a young man observed. “Before that the place was always kept up.”

“This neighborhood’s quiet, real quiet,” said another man. “You never hear a squeak out of the neighbors usually. This is something happened someplace else, not here.” Veteran detectives cast knowing looks. Murder was always something that happened someplace else.

Within a few hours, Pasadena police were able to reconstruct the last morning in the life of Dean Corll. Most of the story came from Wayne Henley, but Timothy Kerley and Rhonda Williams were able to corroborate a few points.

They had arrived at 3 A.M., and Corll had made an angry scene about Rhonda. “You weren’t supposed to bring any girl!” the irate man shouted. “Goddamn you, you ruined everything!” Henley explained that the girl had no place to go, and he was hoping that she could travel with them later. Dean was aghast, but soon he appeared to calm down and offered his guests a paper bag and a can of acrylic paint for a “huffing” party. With Corll watching intently, Wayne and Tim and Rhonda took turns spraying short bursts of paint into the bag and inhaling deeply. The hallucinatory game went on for an hour or two, until one by one

they had sprawled unconscious on the rug.

Henley came to after daybreak. His ankles were bound tightly together and Dean was snapping handcuffs on his wrists. “Man, you blew it bringin’ that girl!” Corll snarled. “But I’m gonna fix you now!” Wayne glanced around. The floor was covered with plastic. Tim Kerley had been stripped, and both Kerley and the girl were trussed with nylon rope and straps.

“I’m gonna kill you all!” Corll raged. “But first I’m gonna have my fun.”

He turned the portable radio up to a high volume and dragged Henley into the kitchen. “I’ll teach you a lesson!” he screamed, and rammed a .22 caliber pistol into the young man’s belly.

Wayne gasped and begged for life. He reminded Corll of their long friendship, of the good times they had enjoyed together. He promised to torture and kill the others, if that was what Corll wanted. “I’ll do anythang yew want me to, Dean!” he whimpered. *“Anythang!”* At last Corll relented, removed the shackles and the ropes, and shoved him back into the bedroom.

“Cut off her clothes!” he ordered, handing over the hunting knife. The boy watched as Corll laid the small pistol on a night table and began to fumble at his own clothes and fling them about.

As Henley carefully worked on Rhonda’s clothes, he watched out of the corner of his eyes. Corll rolled the naked Kerley over on his stomach and spread-eagled him against the plywood board, securing him by ropes and two pairs of handcuffs. Then he turned to the unconscious girl and strapped her on her back with canvas and nylon ropes. “You take the girl,” he told Henley, “and I’ll mess with Tim.”

Wayne stalled. The undressed Corll climbed atop Kerley. Rhonda lifted her head heavily and stared through unfocusing eyes at the scene. “Hey, Dean!” Henley shouted. “Why don’t yew let me take the chick outa here? She don’t wanna see that!”

When Corll ignored him, the agitated boy grabbed the pistol from the night table and shouted above the radio, “Back off now! *Stop!”*

Corll jumped to his feet and lurched toward Henley. “Kill me, Wayne,” he said. “Kill me!” The boy backed away, but the powerfully built man charged after him. When they were only a foot or two apart, Corll said, “You won’t do it!” Henley pulled the trigger, and pulled it again and again until his friend had toppled against the baseboard.

He returned to the bedroom and began releasing the others. Kerley was

semiconscious, only vaguely aware of what was happening. When the tape was removed from Rhonda's mouth, she giggled and said, "Oh, quit playin', Wayne!" Using the walls for support, she hopped around on her one good foot and tripped full length over the body, staining her hands with blood and still not comprehending. In the dim light of the curtained house she inspected her hands and wondered how they had become covered with catsup. She pushed herself up and saw the glazed eyes of Dean Corll, and began screaming. Henley calmed her and helped her to her feet, and after he called police, the three waited on the front porch, as far as possible from the dead man.

During the long interrogation at Pasadena headquarters, Tim Kerley told police that Henley had made a strange statement while they waited. "He told me, 'If you wasn't my friend, I coulda got fifteen hundred dollars for you,'" Kerley said. The statement seemed meaningless for the moment, an acrylic *non sequitur*, but the skilled Pasadena detectives used it to open a line of private questioning with Henley. It turned out that the boy was already on probation, for carrying a pistol, and he seemed eager to cooperate. Ingratiatingly, he told how he had thought of fleeing the scene of the shooting, "but I jes' decided I better set there and wait for y'all."

"Who's this Dean Corll?" a detective asked.

Henley explained that his old friend was a thief, among other things. The plastic on the floor and the acrylic paints had come from Houston Lighting & Power Company, where Corll worked as a relay tester. The seats in his Ford van had been stripped from a stolen Chevrolet Camaro.

Slowly the detectives steered Henley around to the nature of the early-morning rites at Corll's house. Why the dildo, the handcuffs, the rectangular plywood board with its four holes and handcuffs and neat thin loop of cord and orange pillow at the top? Henley told the detectives that Corll "likes little boys," and had been paying him for their procurement, sometimes generously, sometimes with promises or IOU's. He said that Corll had made a slip that morning while issuing his fiery threats. "He said I wouldn't be the first one he kilt," Henley told the detectives. "He said he'd already kilt a few boys and buried them in a boat shed."

The interrogators asked where the boat shed was, and Wayne told them that Dean had once taken him to a rented shed in southwest Houston; the two of them had carried out dirt in twenty-gallon cans. He said he thought he could find it again.

AT TWO-THIRTY THAT AFTERNOON, Houston Detective Daniel James was sitting in

the homicide office on the third floor of headquarters when the telephone rang with a message from Pasadena. Automatically the young officer scribbled notes:

Dean Corll	Dead man
Wayne Henley	Killer
Timothy Kerley	Boy
Rhonda Williams	Girl

The caller said that Wayne Henley had spoken of "bodies" buried in a shed somewhere in southwest Houston, but added that the young killer had been involved in an all-night "bagging" party and might still be under the influence. At the moment, no one was taking him seriously.

Danny James, twenty-seven years old, was a rookie detective; he had worked on one murder to date, but he had learned a few lessons about "confessions," especially the kind that come from huffers and pill freaks. "It's just another kook," he said to himself. He turned to detectives Jack Hamel and Jim Tucker and said *pro forma,* "Pasadena says they've got a killing and information's come from it that there's gonna be a bunch of killings, or several anyway, and it's gonna come over here into Houston."

Hamel, a thirty-six-year-old self-styled "country boy" who had recently scored first on the examination for lieutenant, heard the rest of the story and announced that it was nothing to get dandered about. Homicide detectives, he explained patiently, must accustom themselves to wild tales, and anyway it was close to the end of the shift. His partner, Jim Tucker, twenty-nine and chubby and jocular, said that for once he had to agree with his elderly partner. Tucker said he had planned to leave a few minutes early to shop for an anniversary present for his wife, and he saw no compelling reason to hang around headquarters waiting for Pasadena's latest opium dream to unfold. "We haven't done anything all day," he said. "If we're gonna get something, I'd rather get it early and get it over with."

The team of Hamel and Tucker, Mr. Bones and Mr. Beef behind their backs (and sometimes in front), was deceptively skilled, particularly at the technique of interrogation. Sometimes they seemed to outbumble television's lackadaisical Lieutenant Columbo, but there was always method, artfully concealed. They joked and needled and ragged, bestowed their smiles and handshakes impartially on brother officers and odious murderers, and caught their flies with honey. Now they pounced on young James, the handsome clotheshorse of the homicide division.

“Say, Danny,” Hamel said, “you remember your last murder case? Your *only* murder case? The one where your pardner was on vacation and I came along to he’p?”

James nodded.

“Well, this time you’re strictly on your own,” Hamel said with feigned abruptness. “I know you’re alone again today, but that’s not my problem. You took the call, *you* make the killin’!”

James said the case would probably fizzle out anyway. “I’m skeptical,” he said with the insouciance of two months’ experience as a detective. “I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Well, jes’ hold on there a minute!” Hamel said, changing tactics. “You *never* know about these thangs. You better saddle up your pony and git ready to ride. You might have a *beeg* one this time.”

Danny James looked at his watch. It was nearly 3 P.M., an hour before the end of the shift, and soon he would pick up his wife, a fingerprint classifier, and drive home to their daily reunion with two children. He enjoyed his job, but he enjoyed the reunion, too.

Inside his windowed office overlooking the bullpen where the three detectives bantered, Lieutenant Breckenridge Porter answered his phone. A Pasadena detective was calling, passing along the latest word on the killing. “What killin’?” Porter asked. A potbellied cigar-chomping veteran with thirty-one years of experience, he had heard nothing about the case. “Now holt on there a second, ol’ buddy,” he said. “Take it from the top.” The middle-aged Porter knew how a tale should be told; his aunt was Katherine Anne Porter, the novelist and short-story writer. Now he leaned back with his cowboy boots on the desk and his balding gray head nestled against the telephone and heard about “bodies buried in a shed in Houston.”

At the end, the caller added, “Oh, say, our boy Henley’s mentioned something about Corll killing a fella name of Cobble. By any chance would you check your files and see if you got something on Cobble?”

Porter sat upright. “Hell,” he said, “damn right I do! *Shee-it*, yeh! I got a file rat cheer on my desk. We been workin’ on it ’cause it smacked of a little violence. Somethin’ screwball about it.”

“Well, listen, Lieutenant,” the Pasadena detective went on, “this Corll’s supposed to’ve killed this Cobble, and there’s something about a kid named David Hilligiest, too. H-I-L-L-I-G-I-E-S-T. Henley says Corll talked about

burying ’em all in the same place.”

Porter said, “Bear’s ass!”—one of his favorite expletives—and beckoned his entire available staff into his office. Jack Hamel, Jim Tucker and Danny James all remembered the case of Cobble and Jones. Marty Ray Jones’s cousin, Karl Siebeneicher, was a fellow detective in homicide, and another pair of homicide detectives had begun to interest themselves in the case a week or so earlier. And almost everybody in the division had dealt with Vern Cobble at least once since the boys’ disappearance. The man had visited the office every day or two, buttonholing detectives and pleading for action.

“Those two kids had been in a little dope business, so we didn’t think it was worth checking,” Danny James said. “We figured they were holed up someplace, working out a way to raise money.”

Jack Hamel said, “We tried to write the Cobble father off, ’cause we felt like his hippy son had done pulled the hippy thing. You know how these kids’ll git away from home and call back and swear they need a thousand dollars or they’re never gonna see daylight again? His daddy’d come in here and set down and tell us that him and his brother-in-law’d talked to ever’body they could possibly talk to, gone ever’place they could possibly go to, and then he’d say, ‘I don’t know what you can do, but why don’t you *do* something?’ So I’d say, ‘Well, we will! What do you suggest?’ And he’d say, ‘Well, I don’t know.’ Thangs like ’at. So we just left it there.”

“Yeh,” his partner Tucker said. “It seemed like another one of those cases of ‘My darling child is gone with his hippy friends and we’d like you to find him.’ What can we do on that?”

The lieutenant ordered Danny James to ask Missing Persons and Juvenile for a check on David Hilligiest. A few minutes later James reported that there was a substantial file. The thirteen-year-old boy had disappeared in May of 1971, and the parents had pressed the search every day for over two years.

Lieutenant Porter called Pasadena back and said he would provide assistance whenever they were ready to begin digging, and the Pasadena dispatcher said detectives were en route to Houston police headquarters with their prisoner. “Y’all kin go on home,” Porter told Hamel, Tucker and James. “We got enough men comin’ in to handle it.”

By four o’clock, only three of the scheduled six homicide detectives had arrived for the evening shift; the others were either on vacation or taking off for previous overtime. Two day-shift detectives heard about the case and volunteered. One was Larry Earls, a hard-driving thirty-year-old who doubled as a private security

guard, and the other was Karl Siebeneicher, at thirty-one a master's degree candidate and operator of two business ventures on the side. When the Pasadena team arrived with the manacled Wayne Henley, Siebeneicher showed pictures of the two missing boys to the young suspect.

"Know these guys?" the detective asked pleasantly.

"Yeh," Henley said quickly. "That's Marty Jones and Charles Cobble."

Henley offered no further comment, and Siebeneicher did not inform him that he was Marty Ray Jones's cousin. A few days earlier, he had learned for the first time that his young cousin was missing, and had gone into the files to study the case. Now he told himself that there must be some tangible connection between Henley and the two missing boys. Was murder the connecting link? He climbed into the Pasadena car along with two Pasadena detectives and the taciturn Henley, and they headed south in the direction of the Astrodome. Larry Earls and another detective would stop by city jail to pick up trusties and equipment for a digging operation and meet the others later at the shed.

Henley directed the driver to an isolated intersection about nine miles south of downtown Houston, to a region of small industries, sheds, fields, falling-down barns, and wildcat housing developments. He pointed to a power plant sticking up from the scrubby coastal plains like a miniature metropolis and said, "That's where ol' Dean worked. He tested relays, or sumpin' like that."

A mile farther south, the undercover police car drove slowly through a neighborhood of modest homes and small businesses to a rutted shell road with the inappropriate name of Silver Bell. The narrow lane dead-ended alongside an L-shaped array of unpainted sheds made of galvanized steel and bearing the name Southwest Boat Storage. It was nearly six o'clock on the summer evening; the fierce sun was slipping down toward the horizon, and a few sprigs of morning-glory hung from a fence and shone like sapphires in the afternoon light. In front of the sheds was a crushed-shell parking area, partly covered with grass and prickly weeds. To the east, beyond the dead end, thick tangles of scrub and tropical vines were matted beneath the high-tension power lines that led to the late Dean Corll's place of employment a mile or so to the north.

Wayne Henley walked shakily toward a shed marked "11." Detectives found it was tightly secured by a padlock. One of the Pasadena officers jogged down the road to the owner's house and asked for a key. "Why do you want a key?" asked Mayme Meynier.

"The man that rents the stall was killed this morning," the detective said. "We need to get inside."

Mrs. Meynier said that each renter provided his own locks, and she had no idea how to open the doors.

“Well, is it okay if we break the lock?” the detective asked.

“Yes, I guess so,” the puzzled woman said.

One of the officers took a tire tool and snapped the hasp. As the tall doors creaked open, a blast of scorching air hit the assembled men like a fist. Karl Siebeneicher glanced over at Wayne Henley. “He started to take a step inside,” the mild-mannered detective said later, “but then his face just turned ashen, pale, grim. It was like he knew it was too late now; he’d given up his last options. He kind of staggered around outside the door, like he was trying to get himself together, and right then’s when I *knew* there was gonna be something in that shed. I just was *positive:* we’d found my little cousin.”

In the early-evening shadows, the detectives loosened their collars and adjusted their eyes to the cavernous interior. The sheds were fifteen feet high by twelve wide by thirty-four deep, big enough for small yachts, but there was no sign of a boat inside No. 11. The detectives poked about the insufferably hot interior and clucked together about the contents: a jumbled nest of empty cardboard boxes, a stripped 1971 Chevrolet Camaro under a tarpaulin, a pair of acetylene torches with tanks, two ten-pound sacks of Red Top dehydrated lime, eight empty olive-drab twenty-gallon cans marked “Survival supplies, Office of Civil Defense, Department of Defense, DRINKING WATER,” two empty twenty-gallon garbage containers made of plastic, several cans of acrylic spray paint, a loose twelve-by-fifteen-foot carpet with a pile of dirt at its center, an unconnected telephone transceiver, and various tools, wires and batteries. Propped against the right wall was a child’s homemade bicycle, yellow, with one wheel larger than the other. A few feet away were two plastic bags, one containing an empty sack of lime, the other mixed male clothing, medium to small size, including a pair of mod shoes with one-inch soles.

A detective made a note of the registration numbers on the bicycle and the stripped Chevrolet and radioed them to headquarters; soon it was established that the bike belonged to a thirteen-year-old Pasadena boy who had vanished five days earlier, and the car had been stolen from a used-car lot in March.

A Houston police car arrived with two more detectives and two trusties. Siebeneicher asked the prisoners if they knew their assignment. “No,” one said.

“Well, we’re gonna have you digging for bodies,” the detective said.

The older trusty smiled patronizingly. “Like they say, old boy,” he told his colleague, “every job’s got to have a foreman.” He passed the other man a

shovel.

Siebeneicher clapped both trusties firmly by the shoulders and said, “No, men, we got us an integrated team here. You’re gonna have to work together.” The two prisoners in their jail coveralls shuffled inside the doors and waited nervously for instructions. The equanimous Siebeneicher, seeing their doleful looks, took pains to tell them, “Look, we’re not picking on you, but somebody has to do it.”

Inside the left wall of the shed, behind a stack of cardboard boxes, Houston Homicide Detective Larry Earls studied a spot where the compacted earth of the shed buckled upward, creating a star-shaped series of cracks. The heavily built Earls got on his hands and knees and peered into the earth; five or six inches down he thought he could make out a change of color. “Let’s try right here,” he said to the younger trusty, standing alongside with his shovel. “Just take it nice and easy, and if you hit something, stop.”

The other prisoner joined in, and within ten or fifteen minutes the two reluctant diggers had uncovered a layer of white. Earls took a closer look. “Lime!” he said. “Keep on digging, but slow.”

The others crowded around silently, and the only noise was the gritty rhythm of the shovels, biting away the sandy earth an inch or two at a time. A small trapezoid of brownish yellow began to appear below the lime, and a sickening stench curled into the shed, as though the diggers had suddenly breached a fumarole in a sulphur pit. Combined with the superheated enclosed air of the shed, the effect was strongly emetic. Larry Earls held his nose and scraped some dirt away with his hand. “It’s a skull,” he said quietly. “Keep digging.”

The younger trusty lifted another load of dirt and then clutched his stomach. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do this,” he said, and bolted for the fresh air. No one gave chase. There were other officers outside, guarding Henley, and anyway, city jail trusties presented the lowest possible escape risk. Probably the young digger was in trouble for unpaid parking tickets or a family squabble. It was easy to see what the older trusty had been jailed for, as he leaned popeyed and quivering against his spade. Intoxication was a common cause of city jail imprisonment.

The robust Larry Earls picked up the other shovel and began removing dirt below the skull, exposing the pale verdigris chest of a very small man or a boy in clear plastic. The young trusty apologized and rejoined the operation. With three men now digging, they soon uncovered the naked body of a blond boy, twelve or thirteen years old, encased in plastic and lying on his back. Loops of masking

tape pinched tightly into the covering at the neck, waist and ankles. The body looked as though it had been in the ground about a week.

Just outside the two large doors of the shed, Wayne Henley sat on the ground in his Pasadena jail attire and his handcuffs. Karl Siebeneicher tapped the boy on the arm with a pack of cigarets. “Thanks,” Henley said. “What’s yer name?”

“Karl,” the detective said. “Just Karl.” Siebeneicher believed in keeping life simple. Whenever the phone rang back at headquarters, he would answer, “Homicide. Karl.” His business cards bore his picture as well as his name, “so that all those folks that can’t say my name’ll at least know what I look like. Just trying to be helpful.”

Now he was trying to be helpful to the young killer, and he crouched down to hear what the boy was saying through his tears. “I wanna use the phone,” Henley said. “I wanna call mah mama ’fore she hears all this on the radio.”

Siebeneicher looked around. The nearest telephone would be in Mrs. Meynier’s house, about a hundred yards away, and the nearest pay phone farther than that. “I’d like to help you,” he told the weeping boy, “but we’ve got to stay right here.”

A newspaper reporter stepped up and said, “There’s a phone over there,” beckoning toward a television news car belonging to Jack Cato of KPRC-TV, Houston.

A small voice, one of Wayne’s younger brothers, answered the call, and Henley said, “Is Mama there?”

“Who?” his brother asked. The radiotelephone distorted voices.

“Mama.” Wayne mouthed the word whiningly: MAWoo-ma.

A female, slightly on the defensive, said, “Who’s this?”

“This is Wayne,” the boy said.

“Yes, this is Mama, baby.” Now her voice was calm and motherly.

Henley sounded confused, as though there were no words for what he had to tell his mother. “Mama?” he said again.

“Yes.”

“I kilt Dean.” His voice was strangled and labored.

“Wayne?” his mother said uncomprehendingly.

“Ma’am?”

“Oh, Wayne, you *didn’t!*”

“Yep,” the boy said, and quickly corrected himself. “Yes’m.”

“Oh, God!” Mary Henley said. “Where are you?”

“I’m—” He stopped and listened to his mother’s sobs. “It’s all rat,” he said.

Mrs. Henley cried, “Wayne—”

“It’s all rat!” the boy shouted into the phone. And then softly, “It’s all rat.”

“Where *are* you?”

“I’m out at his war’house.”

“Where?”

“Out at that war’house he keeps.”

“Kin I come out there?”

Henley looked questioningly at Siebeneicher. “Yeh,” the boy said into the phone. “Yes—”

“No!” the detective said.

“She cain’t?” Henley asked, and Siebeneicher shook his head emphatically. Nothing could be less useful at the impromptu burial site than an upset mother.

Henley turned back to the phone and said in a consoling tone, “No, yew cain’t come.” His mother cried louder. “I’m with the police, Mama,” he said by way of explanation.

“When kin I see you?”

“This evening’,” the boy said. “I’m gonna let ya go, Mama.”

Mary Henley sobbed. “Okay, baby.”

The body in its plastic shroud was being carried out, and Henley resumed his position on the ground, facing away from the shed, his head in his hands and his shoulders jerking spasmodically. He began mumbling, and Siebeneicher bent down to listen. “I knew Marty, and Marty’s there,” the boy intoned. “And David, I grew up with him and he lived next door. And I went to school with Charles.”

“Take it easy, take it easy,” Siebeneicher said.

“It’s mah fault,” Henley said. “I cain’t help but feel guilty, like I done kilt those boys myself. I caused ’em to be daid. I led ’em strite to Dean.” Siebeneicher decided to let the boy “run his head”; many a murder case had been solved by the musings of a guilt-stricken suspect. While attendants busied themselves zipping the victim’s small body into a bag, Wayne Henley rambled on. He told how he had known Corll for two years, how he had introduced many Heights boys to the sex murderer, and how he might even have been marked for death

himself.

“Well, then, you should be glad things happened the way they did,” Siebeneicher said.

“How’s that?” the boy asked.

“Because if they hadn’t, we might be digging you out of the ground tonight.”

Henley hid his face in his hands and wailed.

Inside the shed, something caught the practiced eye of Larry Earls as the two trusties began shoveling dirt back into the emptied grave. “Hold on!” he said. “Try digging a little farther down, under where the body was.”

The prisoners dug mud that had been drenched in body fluids. They removed a few more inches and began scraping against old bones. A skeleton lay in a fetid aspic of muck.

Lieutenant Breck Porter was waiting in the office to coordinate developments in the case, and a detective telephoned him to report the second body. “Goddamn!” Porter said. “Keep diggin’! I’m comin’ right out. How’s that Mexican dragline workin’?”

The detective said that the “Mexican dragline,” Texas vernacular for laborers with shovels, was falling apart, that one of the laborers had already expressed strong misgivings and the other was suffering delirium tremens. “Try to keep ’em goin’ a little longer,” Porter said. “I’ll run by the jail and pick you up *beaucoup* more.”

It had grown dark, and a fire engine arrived at the shed with floodlights and a fan. Assisted by sweating detectives, the unhappy trusties began digging to the right of the first grave, closer to the center of the shed, at a spot where the sandy earth looked broken. Eight inches down they came to a layer of lime, and below the lime they found the bodies of two more teen-age boys, buried recently. One had been shot twice in the head with a small-caliber weapon. The other had been strangled with a Venetian-blind cord, still knotted in a tight noose around his neck. The mouth was open so wide that all the upper and lower teeth showed. “Poor kid,” a detective said, shaking his head slowly. “He died straining for air.”

“Straining for air,” said Larry Earls, “or screaming.”

On the parking area outside No. 11, the owner of Southwest Boat Storage had walked up. “If it’s not too much trouble,” Mayme Meynier said to Karl Siebeneicher, “could I find out what’s going on?”

The detective showed his identification and nodded toward Henley, still sitting on a patch of grass with his head tucked into his knees and his cuffed hands

obscuring his face. “If that boy’s telling the truth, ma’am, there may be a lot of bodies buried in the floor of that stall,” Siebeneicher said.

Mrs. Meynier shuddered. “Why, he was the nicest person you’ll ever meet!” she said. “He had the most infectious smile you’ll ever see!”

“Yes, ma’am. You mean Corll?”

“Yes. Dean. Why, we were always talking to him. Just a week or two ago he offered to give me some plants. He’d go out of his way to visit with me.”

Siebeneicher asked how long Dean Corll had been renting the shed, and Mrs. Meynier made a hurried round-trip to her house to examine the records. “Since November 17, 1970, at twenty dollars a month,” she said, “and never a bit of trouble.” She said that one day nine cars had pulled up in front of the stall and Corll explained that he was selling a few pieces of furniture, but otherwise there had been nothing untoward. She said Corll visited the shed two or three times a week, sometimes to drop things off, sometimes to work inside. About two months earlier, he had arrived with a young helper and hauled in something “big, black and heavy,” but no one had thought anything of it. Another time Corll sat alone in his van outside the stall for an hour and a half till everyone else left. “He just waited patiently,” Mrs. Meynier said, “and then he got out and began unloading something. We figured it was something he was proud of, or something he didn’t want to show.”

There had been a faintly unpleasant odor about the shed, especially after heavy rains, and a neighborhood dog had been making a pest of itself for two years by scratching and whining at the door. The exact contents of No. 11 were unknown, but Mrs. Meynier assumed that Corll had just about filled it. For the last several months, he had been pestering her for more space.

By 9 P.M., reporters from every news outlet in Texas were converging on the scene, and Siebeneicher moved Henley to the backseat of one of the Pasadena police cars. The boy was alternating between fits of garrulity and fits of depression, and sometimes his head slumped over and his mouth hung open, as though he were comatose. Siebeneicher assumed that the young prisoner was experiencing a post-acrylic reaction, and left him in the company of a few friendly reporters. The interview began slowly, with Henley sounding like a Watergate witness, offering airy tergiversations. But after a while he seemed willing to tell the whole story.

While reporters took hurried notes and poked microphones in his face, the boy told how he had met Corll through a mutual friend “a year ago last winter” and since then had stayed often at Corll’s house. He admitted that he had visited the

shed more than once, that just a month earlier “me and Dean was here workin’ on the Camaro and carryin’ out dirt.”

A reporter asked how he earned his living. “Well, I was in asphalt pavin’ till the end of April,” he said with a note of pride. “Since then I been doin’ odd jobs, movin’, stripin’. I was suppose to go to work this mornin’ on one of mah jobs.”

He was asked what his family thought about his friendship with the older man. “Oh, nothin’,” the boy said. “My mama, she liked ol’ Dean a lot.” He said he had gone “huntin’ and partyin’ in East Texas over the weekend, so I didn’t see Dean then. Usually he’d come by in the afternoon and we’d go drank a beer at least every other day. Yesterday he took me to mah driver’s ed class in Bellaire. He was always doin’ nice thangs like ’at.”

Henley said that he and Corll had decided to pull up stakes and “travel together, jes’ git in the van and git lost for a spell.” The scheduled departure date was less than three weeks off. “Dean tol’ me he was in some kind of a organization that he could git a lot of money, thousands and thousands of dollars. I never rilly believed it, ’cause Dean lived poor. All he had was a old TV, no stereo, jes’ a transistor radio. He’d be broke onct a month when the bills come in.”

Henley glanced warily toward the shed and asked, “Are they still diggin’ up boys in there?” A reporter told him that the body count had reached four.

“Four?” Wayne said in a surprised voice.

“Any idea who they could be?” a television cameraman asked.

Henley appeared to think deeply. “Let’s see,” he said. “There ’uz Charles and Marty, that’s two, and David Hilligiest was missin’, that’s three, and—oh, yeh, I forgot! When David went away, back a couple years ago, he had a kid name of Malley with him. Neither one’s been seen since. Yeh, I remember Malley’s picture with David on the wanted posters.”

Shortly before 10 P.M., with four bodies unearthed and the digging proceeding in a far corner of the shed, Henley began to show marked signs of nervousness. “He’s so jumpy,” one reporter told another, “he’s afraid to be left alone in the car.”

A newspaperman peeked into the darkened vehicle. Henley was slumped over, repeating, “Don’t leave me. *Don’t leave me!* If you gotta leave me, then *please* send somebody else to set with me.” A few minutes later, the boy said, “When are they gonna take me back to jail? I’m gittin’ close to the edge. I gotta awful headache. I’m rilly spaced out.” The reporter noticed that his pupils were dilated, his head rolled loosely on his neck, and his speech was even more slurred than

usual. Around ten o'clock, a second Pasadena team arrived and drove the shaken boy away.

Back in a corner of the shed, bare-chested trusties and detectives with handkerchiefs over their faces slowly penetrated what appeared to be a multiple grave, about six by twelve feet, topped by the characteristic layer of lime. One by one the bodies of young men came into sight, most of them in advanced states of decomposition, each wrapped neatly in its own plastic. One had been buried sitting up, two others in the fetal position, one on its back, and many bones were intermingled. Detectives wearing surgical gloves knelt under the fire department floodlights and groped for bits of rotten flesh and crumbling bone, fighting nausea and hoping that they were not mixing up the final remains. Hardly a word was spoken; giant shadows danced against the serrated inner walls, and exhausted men shook their heads and wiped their eyes and tried to muffle their gasps of shock and horror with each succeeding find. They had all seen death, but none had encountered the wholesale transfiguration of rollicking boys into reeking sacks of carrion.

Near midnight, a total of eight bodies had been removed, and most of the sandy earth was still undisturbed. Lieutenant Breck Porter, his cherubic face daubed with gray mud, shouted, "Goddamn it, that's enough!"

His men dropped their shovels, and the trusties hurried toward the open air.

"We're stinkin' like a buncha Goddamn skunks," Porter said. "Let's quit till tomorrow."

A uniformed guard was posted at the door, the floodlights were doused, and one by one the police and fire vehicles pulled away toward the distant glow of Houston.

Just before leaving for his nighttime job at the post office, Vern Cobble had heard fragments of a radio report about bodies in a shed in southwest Houston. At first, he failed to associate the news with his son and Marty Ray Jones, now missing for two weeks. But as he slogged through the evening's routine at the post office, he found himself thinking back on the announcer's words. He realized that there might be full details on television at ten, and he wanted to make sure that his wife was spared the ordeal of watching. He called homicide for the latest information, and a detective told him that bodies were indeed coming out of the earth and that Charles Cobble and Marty Ray Jones were believed to be two of them. "Well, how in the world do you know that?" Vern asked in a weak voice.

"We have good information," the detective answered.

“Any doubt?”

“Hardly any.”

It was five minutes after ten when Cobble dialed home and told his wife, “I’m feeling a little sick.”

“What’s the matter?” Betty asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Vern lied. “Just a little upset. I’ll come on home in a while.”

“Have you seen the news?”

“Don’t watch it!” Cobble blurted out.

“I’ve already watched it,” Betty said. “Do you think it’s them?”

Vern hesitated, then said slowly, “Yes, it’s them. They’re sure it’s them.”

Betty said she had known the truth the instant the bag of clothes had been held up on the TV screen. “One of the shirts was the same color as one Charles wore a lot. I saw somethin’ white, and Charles always wore that one with the sea gull on it, remember? Then I heard them say that one of the victims was the cousin of a homicide detective. Who else could that be but Marty?”

When Vern Cobble put down the phone, he found that he could hardly stand. His eyes brimmed with tears and his hands danced helplessly. For an instant he imagined that he was dreaming, that he was about to wake up and regain control of himself, but just as suddenly he realized that he was wide awake and Charles was dead. He slumped to the floor and nearly lost consciousness. The night foreman, Roosevelt Ross, rushed over. “Charles is dead,” Cobble murmured, and Ross lifted him to his feet and half carried him to an enclosed office. Two postal inspectors were inside. “Would you please get out of this office?” Ross asked.

The men hesitated.

“I said *‘Get out!’”* the foreman shouted, and the inspectors scurried through the door. The nurse was called and the stricken Vern Cobble was placed under sedation.

That afternoon, the Hilligiest family had gone to the funeral of Dorothy’s sister, and the close couple sat up in the evening chatting and exchanging memories of the dead woman. As usual, Fred had to be at work at sunup, striping another parking lot before heavy traffic began, and at 10 P.M. he went to bed. Dorothy was sitting alone, mourning her newest loss, when the telephone rang. “Mrs. Hilligiest,” a friend said, “have you heard the news? They found bodies buried out at a boat shed.”

“No,” Dorothy said calmly. She had endured the finding of bodies before, and

none had turned out to be David's. "We were just sitting up talking," she said. "We missed the ten o'clock news."

"Well, I thought I'd let you know," the friend said. "Just in case, you know?"

Mrs. Hilligiest said thanks, and put the telephone down, saying to herself, "They surely didn't find David buried in a boat shed. No, things like that just don't happen. You read 'em, but they don't happen to *you*. When they find David, we'll be the *first* to know, not the last." She repeated the comforting phrases, and at last succeeded in convincing herself that there was nothing to worry about, that the daylight hours would bring relief.

She began undressing, listening to Fred's deep, even breathing. Thoughts of her sister ran together with thoughts of her son. She tiptoed to the telephone and called a television newsroom, and a busy editor suggested that she check with Houston homicide. She redialed and heard another harassed voice say, "Lieutenant Porter speakin'."

Dorothy asked if there was anything new on the case of her missing son. Porter said, "Mrs. Hilligiest, it's very possible that one of these kids they dug up is your boy. I have his file here now."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Ol' Henley told us."

"Who?"

"Elmer Wayne Henley, Junior. The boy that shot Dean Corll and started the whole thing unravelin'. Him and this Corll, they been prankin' now for two, three years."

"Wayne Henley?" Dorothy Hilligiest exclaimed. "Why, he's our little neighbor boy!"

"Yes, ma'am. Lived on Twenty-seventh Street."

"Well, what's *happening* out there?" the shocked woman asked.

"It looks like a homosexual thing," Lieutenant Porter said. "We haven't even figured it out ourself yet, but it looks like these clowns were molestin' young boys and then killin' 'em. Are you alone, Mrs. Hilligiest?"

"My husband's here."

"Well, good. We were fixin' to send someone out to tell you, but since we've talked I kin save the trip."

The lieutenant asked for a full description of the clothes David and Malley Winkle had been wearing, and the names of their dentists, and promised to call

again with more information.

Dorothy Hilligiest telephoned the news to Geraldine Winkle's house a block away, then woke up her husband and told him it appeared their long wait was over. At two-thirty in the morning, the doubly bereaved couple sat comforting each other in their living room, wondering where to turn next. "Well, I'll tell you what we're gonna do," the husband said angrily. "We're gonna go on down there and see for ourse'ves!"

They drove for thirty minutes to the southern edge of Houston, but they were soon lost in a maze of twisting suburban streets and ancient farm roads and superhighways and dead ends. They were cruising aimlessly when a police car sped by with its roof light pulsating bright blue. Fred spun his car and followed on a hunch. A few minutes later both cars pulled up in front of the L-shaped shed, silhouetted low and squat against the stars. Hilligiest asked for information, and the policemen explained that they were just relieving the other guards and knew nothing themselves.

Dorothy and Fred peered toward the black outline of the sheds, but all they could make out was an opening where the two big doors had been swung open, and a uniformed policeman puffing on the stub of a cigaret. "Can we go in?" they called out, and the policeman said he was sorry, but he had his orders. The unhappy couple drove back home and made coffee for another all-night vigil. The years had prepared them.

BEFORE HE HAD DRIVEN HALFWAY to headquarters Thursday morning, Detective James Tucker heard portents of a bad day. Not that the previous night had produced any rich memories; he had fidgeted around the living room while fellow detectives worked the most spectacular crime in Houston's history, a case that he could have been working himself, except for an easygoing lieutenant who had let him off early. Now, he supposed, he would be permitted the privilege of cleaning up the paper work. Detective Tucker, formerly Clerk Tucker of the police records office, was the fastest typist in homicide, and much in demand when tedious details mounted up. "Yes, sir," he complained to himself as he headed toward headquarters, "they'll surely have plenty of work for Ol' Fastfingers this morning."

The car radio told him that eight bodies had been dug from the shed so far. Momentarily, he tinkered with the idea of driving straight to the scene and announcing that he had been assigned, but the homicide division was not yet an anarchy—although it sometimes seemed so—and he drove on toward the downtown office. The newscaster went on to say that Houston officers had shot

and killed two men the night before, another dark cloud on the coming day. The hours following such unfortunate events were always hectic, with statements and counterstatements in triplicate and quadruplicate and witnesses trooping in and out and assistant district attorneys demanding all sorts of information, including the shoe sizes of the victims and the drinking habits of the officers involved.

“Some days it doesn’t pay to breathe,” he told his partner, Jack Hamel, when they met in the office.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Hamel said. “They’ll be callin’ us over to CID any minute. Gotta take a statement from somebody.”

CID was the intelligence center of the police department, the unit that kept track of radicals, subversives, “Comsymps” and other potential blots on the commonweal. Other policemen called the CID agents “superspooks.” “That’s the place where they have a voice-activated door,” a detective described it. “You have to use a code to get in. You say something like ‘F-23’ and the door opens. A strange group of folks! None of ’em have names. They all have numbers. Weird!”

Jim Tucker glanced around the homicide bullpen and noticed that every light on the telephone consoles was blinking and several detectives were answering calls frenetically. “What’s going on?” Tucker asked.

“The word’s out on the national wires,” Hamel said. “Every mother in the USA is checkin’ to see if we found her son.”

Tucker clapped his forehead. The office was already shorthanded; August was a popular vacation month as well as a time when officers liked to use up their compensatory days for previous overtime. Two “early” teams were out working the overnight shootings, and the few available detectives in the office had been assigned to return to the shed and search for more bodies, but the jangling telephones had pinned them down. “We better take a few calls while we wait on CID,” Hamel said, and for the next hour the two detectives handled the pathetic entreaties of grieving parents who were convinced that their sons lay dead in Houston. It was a relief when Lieutenant Porter hauled them off to the superspooks.

On the way, Porter explained that a certain David Brooks had come in to make a statement about the mass murders. Brooks was eighteen years old and claimed to have valuable information on Dean Corll. “Kid’s here with his whole damned family,” Porter told the two detectives. “He lives separate from the others, and in the middle of the night he called his brother and said he was involved in this case to x degree, and the brother called the daddy jes’ in a panic, said, ‘You’ve got to

git over here right away,' and the daddy rushed over and they called Belcher and here we are."

"Belcher" was Lieutenant J. D., head of CID and a personal friend of the Brooks family. The tight-lipped little group was assembled in his private office discussing the case. Hamel and Tucker entered and saw an ascetic-looking young man with a sharp straight nose and blond bobbed hair and webbed sandals on his feet. The boy spoke almost inaudibly, seeming very ill at ease, but the father, a dark, weathered man with a strong southern accent, was saying, "So I tole mah son, you kin work for me in mah asphalt bidness, but not with that long hair. So they went out and cut it, him and Henley both, and I let 'em work for a while, till it grew out agin and I wouldn't have 'em around no more."

Lieutenant Belcher interrupted to brief the newcomers. He said young Brooks had told them he had lived with Dean Corll off and on for three years, but had never seen any evidence of crimes. Corll had worked as a relay tester at a power station and seemed steady and dependable. He was a pleasant roommate, undemanding and quiet. "He sorta kept to himself," the boy put in. "Minded his own business and didn't bother nobody. I just don't understand all this murder talk. That's not the Dean I knew."

Tucker and Hamel exchanged a quick glance, and as usual they were of a single mind. "We knew we were listening to pure unregistered bull," Tucker said later. "After you conduct a certain number of interrogations, you can spot lying a mile off. This kid was talking in front of his father and his brother, and that's not the best way to get at the truth. We knew we had to get him outa there."

Lieutenant Belcher, trying to be courteous, suggested that Brooks's statement be taken right there in the CID office, to avoid reporters in the halls. Hamel and Tucker promised to sneak the young man in and out of homicide without exposing him to the press. "Nobody knows his face," Hamel said. "We'll just barge right through."

After four years as a team, the two detectives had a well-worn routine for interrogations. They eschewed the "good cop and bad cop" technique because, as Hamel put it, "Neither one of us can pass for the bad cop; we're both pushovers." Instead, they usually began their questioning together, in a low key, with Hamel probing gently at weak spots and Tucker engaging in his customary light banter, as though the two detectives and the suspect were just three old friends having a nice chat. When the questioning gained momentum, Hamel would slip away and Tucker would turn to his typewriter and begin pounding out the formal statement. If the process bogged down, or the suspect became

recalcitrant, Hamel would re-enter the room, usually with striking effect. “I don’t know the psychological reason it works,” Hamel said, “but there’s somethin’ about comin’ in and out that makes a guy get to the truth. Works for us, anyhow.”

There would be a special difficulty in dealing with David Brooks. Technically the young man was offering only a “witness statement”; he was not a suspect in the case, and the legal presumption was that he was simply being a responsible citizen and trying to assist the police. Under the circumstances he could not be pressured in any way. If he contradicted himself, the contradiction would stand; if he engaged in obvious falsehood, the falsehood would go into the record. He could not be cajoled or intimidated. “And one other little thang,” Jack Hamel noted. “He was brought in by his daddy to a lieutenant who’s a personal friend. The whole thang, see?” David Brooks would be handled with care.

The interrogation had proceeded for only ten minutes when Hamel left the little room. The telephones were ringing more wildly than ever. There were only about seven units working on the day shift; three were on the street, and the others were drowning in phone calls. Hamel rolled up his sleeves and went to work. Occasionally he stuck his nose into the interrogation room, and each time it seemed to him that the taciturn young witness was holding back. “It smelled,” Hamel said. “It really did. I’d go in there and hear him talk about livin’ with a guy that done killed at least eight boys, and the two of ’em were supposed to be real close, Brooks and Corll, and yet he didn’t know a single thang about the killin’s? It added up to more bull, not quite as much bull as he’d been throwin’ in front of his father and brother, but bull jes’ the same.”

Tucker, alternately listening to the boy and transferring pertinent information to his typewriter, had the same feeling. Brooks told how he had met Dean Corll six years before, when the boy was in the sixth grade and Corll was managing a candy factory across from Helms Elementary School. “He’d give us kids candy and rides on his motorcycle,” Brooks said. The two of them, the preadolescent student and the twenty-seven-year-old businessman, became special friends, until the Brooks family broke up and David moved with his mother to Beaumont, eighty-five miles away, for a three-year stay. “But all that time I kept coming back to Houston to visit,” the boy told Tucker, “and whenever I did I’d go see Dean.” A sexual relationship developed at the urging of the older man. “It was always Dean doing something to me, never me doing nothing to Dean,” David emphasized, drawing a distinction that was apparently important to him. For his willingness to allow Corll to commit what Texas statutes call “oral sodomy,” the child was paid five or ten dollars. But there was no talk about

recruiting other boys, or murder.

As the questioning went on through the morning, Brooks seemed to loosen up, and even began exchanging jollities with the easygoing Tucker. “Everybody loves a fat man,” as the detective was fond of saying. His genial disposition was useful in interrogations, and his willingness to kid himself often evoked a similar self-denigration in interviewees, leading to quicker and better confessions.

But David Brooks was stubborn. Despite the beginnings of a rapport, he steadfastly refused to admit that he knew anything about the killings. Of course, there had been a few unpleasant moments with his older roommate. After Brooks had introduced Corll to Wayne Henley, Corll and Henley began ganging up on him. One day Wayne slugged him when he walked into the apartment, and then Dean strapped him on the bed and committed repeated acts of rectal sodomy.

“So you moved out and never went back, right?” Tucker said, anticipating the answer.

“No, we stayed friends,” Brooks said. “But after that I was always afraid of him, and we had a lot of fights.”

“Well, listen, Dave,” Tucker said sympathetically, leaning forward as though the fate of mankind depended on the answer, “why on earth did you ever go back to live with a guy like that?”

The boy was unable to answer plausibly. Hamel re-entered and listened quietly while Tucker led Brooks over the same ground. Then the partners stopped for a strategy session. “Parts of it sound true,” Tucker said outside, “but the rest doesn’t ring.”

“Well, it’s *his* statement,” Hamel said. “If he’s lyin’, he’s lyin’ is all.”

Tucker resumed his solicitous inquiries. “Dave,” he said, “did you ever see anything to suggest that Corll was bothering other kids?”

Brooks paused. He seemed to want to answer, but found his memory hazy. “Oh, yeh!” he said, as though a single vivid scene had flashed into his brain. “Once I saw Wayne and Dean playing with a young boy, showing him a handcuff trick, and when they got him cuffed, they tied him hand and foot.”

A few minutes later, the blond young man said that he and Dean had shared an apartment near the County Orphanage. “I come home and Dean had two li’l ol’ boys tied to a board in the living room and they was all three of ’em naked,” he said. “Dean jumped up and said, ‘I’m just having some fun,’ and he promised me a car if I kept quiet.”

Hamel came in and sat down. “Do you know if Dean killed those two boys?” Tucker asked.

Brooks hesitated again. “Yeh,” he said. “Later on he admitted he kilt ’em, and he bought me a Corvette.”

“Do you have any idea of other boys he might have killed?” Hamel asked.

“When Dean had a place on Schuler, he was hanging around with Mark Scott, and before that he was with Ruben Watson,” Brooks said. “They both disappeared. Maybe he kilt ’em. I wouldn’t know. If there was killing, Wayne and Dean did it. I do remember a boy named Billy Ridinger that they were talking about killing, and I talked ’em out of it. He was strapped on the board, but they let him go.”

Hamel spoke up. “David,” he said in his calm voice, “are you sure you don’t want to tell us the whole truth?”

“I *am* telling the truth,” the boy said, averting his eyes.

At that point in a normal interrogation, Hamel and Tucker would have applied verbal pressure. It was clear to both men that the boy was involved in the murders, but they agreed there was nothing they could do to force a confession. “It’s his statement,” Hamel told Tucker outside. “Let him go ahead and say what he wants. Jes’ take it all down. Later on if somethin’ comes up to disprove it, we’ll git into it again.”

“Ol’ Fastfingers” returned to his typewriter.

At the little jail in suburban Pasadena, Wayne Henley spoke to his mother for the first time since their radiotelephone discussion the evening before. Mary Henley, haggard from a night without sleep, told her son that his three brothers loved him and wanted him to come home.

“Mama,” the boy complained, “I’m sick.” He said he had been kept in a windowless cell, and the experience had left him with a feeling of panic. “I’d ruther they tie me up to a tree than put me in a closed room without windows,” he told his mother. “And I ’bout froze without a blanket.”

The conversation ended with an exchange that left the mother in tears:

“Mama, I’ve tol’ ’em everythang.”

“What do you mean, everything?”

“Just *everythang.*”

“Oh, Wayne!”

“Mama, be happy for me, ’cause now, at last, I kin live.”

Pasadena authorities were convinced that the pimply boy with the thin moustache had held nothing back in a long talk with detectives that morning. He said that he had procured teen-age males for Corll and that Corll sexually assaulted them and sometimes killed them, depending on his frame of mind. Sometimes the boys were tortured by inserting glass rods or dildoes into their body openings; a few were castrated. Henley admitted assisting in eight murders, and said he knew of sixteen others. The third and fourth bodies found in the boat shed, he said, were Charles Cobble and Marty Ray Jones. He said Corll shot the Cobble boy and then both of them strangled Jones. He said he reckoned there were nineteen bodies in the shed, several more on a remote Gulf Coast beach, and another four or five near the Corll family's summer cottage at Lake Sam Rayburn, a four-hour drive to the north. He said that Corll's appetites had seemed to increase lately; "if we coulda got him one boy a day he'd a been happy."

The Pasadena detectives decided to confirm the Lake Sam Rayburn connection right away, and stowed their prisoner in the back of an unmarked car for the familiar trip to pick up observers from Houston homicide. They found the entrance to Houston police headquarters swarming with reporters, and ordered Henley to squat on the floor of the car, out of sight. Detective Jim Tucker was summoned outside for a brief discussion. "Henley's confessed," a Pasadena detective told him, "and he's indicating that the Brooks boy's pretty heavily involved in this."

"Yeh," Tucker said. "We kinda suspicioned that."

Brooks was upstairs perusing his typed "witness statement" before signing it, and Tucker did not want to reopen the interrogation unless necessary. "Hey, I got an idea," Tucker said. "Let's confront Brooks and Henley!" The Pasadena detectives gave their consent.

To avoid the press, the party took the back steps two at a time, by-passing reporters watching the elevators. By the time they had run up three flights, "Ol' Fastfingers" was winded. Wayne Henley said, "Hey, man, why cain't yew keep up?"

"I'm fat and tired, that's why!" Tucker exclaimed.

"Yew mean yew're outa wind already?" Henley said, smiling mischievously.

"I just can't talk to you now," Tucker panted. "Lemme catch my breath. This is killing me!"

At the top of the fourth flight, Henley said, "What's the matter with yew, man? Yew must be outa shape. I rilly enjoyed that run!"

“Say, what *are* you enjoying?” the aggravated Tucker asked. “The run or the attention?”

“The run,” Henley said quickly.

When his heart stopped pounding, Tucker turned to one of the Pasadena detectives and muttered, “It made the fat fella tired, but it didn’t make that boy tired. But that boy’s had a lot of exercise. I never dug a grave.”

David Brooks was sitting in an office in the corner of the homicide division. Henley was steered through the door, and Brooks looked up as though startled. “David,” Henley said, “I made a statement, and I tol’ the whole story, and I thank yew should, too.”

Brooks acted puzzled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “I already told ’em.”

“Well, yew might as well tell the truth, ’cause I done tol’ ’em mah part and I tol’ ’em yer part, and yew wouldn’t believe how much better I feel.”

“Well, I’m gonna stay with my statement,” Brooks said. “I don’t have nothing else to say about it.”

A gleam came into Henley’s eye, and he said, “Well, David, then I’m gonna change mah story and say yew done it all!”

Brooks ignored the remark and handed Tucker his signed statement. He said he would like to talk to his father. After the blond boy was led to another office to await Alton Brooks’s arrival, Henley said, “I was only jokin’. I’m glad I got it all stritened out now, and I’m not gonna change nothin’.” He told Tucker that he had been feeling “poorly” the night before, but that his disposition and his health had improved since his confession. “I rilly feel better,” he said, sounding almost happy about the whole sequence of events. “It’s unbelievable how good I feel!”

After Henley was returned to the Pasadena car for the drive to Lake Sam Rayburn, Tucker told his partner, “Jack, I never saw anybody feeling so good about a confession. He was cheerful, clowning, performing for everybody.”

“Yeh,” Hamel said. “I saw him goin’ out. He was jes’ havin’ a blast.”

Danny James, the rookie homicide detective, begged Breckenridge Porter to assign him to the case he had missed the day before, and the lieutenant said, “Okay, brother, if you wanna go out to that shed and help dig, you’re welcome to it.” James drove home on the way to the Southwest Boat Storage and changed into faded jeans and T-shirt, both expendable. “I didn’t want to ruin my suit,” the homicide division’s fashion plate explained.

Late in the morning, a few newsmen and detectives were standing around the

entrance to the shed talking. Larry Earls and another detective pulled up with a team of trusties, and after a few minutes Earls said, “I asked for heavy digging equipment from the city, but we might as well start in with shovels.”

One of the trusties stuck a spade squarely in the middle of the sandy floor and looked at Earls questioningly. “Sure, why not?” Earls said. “The way we hear, one place is as good as another.”

“Yeh,” Danny James said. “The way we hear, it’s wall-to-wall bodies.”

By noon, the party had disinterred another pair of young boys, wrapped in plastic, covered in lime, and almost entirely skeletonized. Then two more bodies were recovered from individual graves, and another pair in the far left corner. The last two bore identification cards marked Donald and Jerry Waldrop, fifteen and thirteen years old, hospitalization cards in the same names, and two cigaret lighters.

As more bodies came into view, it became almost impossible to separate one victim from another. “We had to reach in with our hands and separate little bitty bits of bone from crushed shell and muck, and then pitch them up into bags,” Larry Earls said later. “We were pulling hair out of the mud in chunks, working in mud made out of dirt and rotten blood. It was caked on our shoes. It got into our clothes. It was awful.”

The officers found the first evidence of sexual mutilation. A small plastic bag lay alongside one body; inside were a penis and testicles. The rest of the body had decomposed, but the airtight sack had preserved the genitalia. Another boy’s penis was gnawed nearly in two. Almost all the victims had been gagged and wrapped in plastic, and heavy twine or Venetian-blind cord was cinched about most of the necks. Several had been shot, their hands tied behind their backs. One had a caved-in chest; it appeared that he had been kicked to death. Most of the victims seemed to have been in their early teens, but there were a few exceptions. Danny James winced as he extracted a pair of muddy pants that were no more than a foot and a half long, suitable for a boy of nine or ten years. The eighth body of the day, found near the entrance, was intact in a striped swimsuit, undershorts and black cowboy boots.

As the hours passed and the temperature climbed, the diggers found that they could work only in short shifts before dashing outside for air. A policeman kicked a hole in the back of the shed, but there was hardly any breeze, and the situation was only slightly improved. The trusties, mostly winos, became casualties themselves, sprawled in disarray on the parking lot, preferring the relentless Texas sun to the specter of death inside. Danny James and Larry Earls

continued to dig in the galvanized-steel cauldron, along with a few other detectives who came and went as they could be spared from the office. An observer who spent the entire day at the shed said later, “The city sent out a backhoe that just wasn’t big enough, and all the work wound up being done by hand. Naturally the men got a little short on patience, and they kind of jumbled the bones around. When they came to graves with more than one body, they just divided the bones into body sacks about equally. I really couldn’t blame them.”

By day’s end, nine bodies had been removed, bringing the total to seventeen, two less than Wayne Henley had forecast for the shed. The operation was shut down for good, to the chagrin of at least one officer. “It just wasn’t done right,” he said. “We waited out there all day for good equipment, but the city of Houston is so slow. We shoulda gone down about six feet and taken every bit of dirt out, but we couldn’t do it by hand, so we just gave up. There’s still bodies in that shed, I’m sure of it.”

David Brooks and his father huddled together in an office at headquarters, and Jim Tucker dropped in on them once in a while to buoy their spirits. “What I’m worried about,” Alton Brooks said, “is the publicity. It might could hurt mah bidness.”

Tucker said, “At this point, you don’t have a whole lot to worry about, Mr. Brooks. Your son’s just given us background information, things he’s heard of. I don’t think you’re gonna get any bad publicity.”

Late in the afternoon, the head of CID, Alton Brooks’s friend J. D. Belcher, hurried into the office. The elder Brooks asked him, “Are we in a position to leave now?”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Lieutenant Belcher said, “but something’s come up.”

The father half rose from his seat, and Belcher said, “Come on, let’s go talk to Lieutenant Porter.”

As gently as possible, Breckenridge Porter broke the news that David Brooks was under arrest. He explained that Texas law provides for the arrest of anyone implicated in a felony confession, and Wayne Henley had informed on the friend of his childhood.

“Take the boy to the magistrate and get him warned,” Porter ordered Tucker.

“I don’t know what there is to live for,” David cried out, and his father patted him on the arm. A judge read the young man’s rights aloud, and then the detective said, “Let’s go, David. We’re going to jail now.”

Brooks turned to his tearful father and said, “I’ll be all right.”

Tucker asked the jailer for a private cell. “We don’t want any heroes getting after him,” he said. The jailer nodded assent. “Oh, and keep an eye on him, will you?” Tucker whispered. “He said something about suicide.”

Brooks’s belt and glasses were removed and he was locked in for the night. Just before Tucker left, the boy said wearily, “I’ll tell ya all about it tomorrow.”

Detective W. L. Young wore stark black glasses, combed his hair neatly to the side, and had about him the dignified look of the scholar. But as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the illusion evaporated. Willie Young was pure down home, as pompous as red-eye gravy and as pedantic as Gomer Pyle. He had been a Houston policeman for sixteen years, and one of his specialties was making people comfortable. Now he was in a police car with Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., and two Pasadena detectives, and they were driving at high speed toward Lake Sam Rayburn, one hundred and sixty-nine miles northeast of Houston, deep in the piney woods. Two other cars full of lawmen followed, and on the way the caravan picked up a team of Texas Rangers in Lufkin.

In the back of the first car, Willie Young was playing his customary role of “a good ol’ boy,” smiling broadly at Henley’s remarks and displaying the Terry-Thomas gap in his front incisors. Seldom in his six years with homicide had Willie encountered such a mouthy killer. Before they had even pulled away from headquarters, the boy had called out to Karl Siebeneicher and practically demanded that the detective hear his story.

In the car, Henley told his companions that Corll had made an offer of two hundred dollars per child nearly three years earlier, “but I sat on it for a year.” Then he got into a financial bind and had to take advantage of the offer. Corll paid the first time, but never again.

“Well, I don’t rilly understand you,” Willie Young said, smiling. “I’ve heard of plenty murders where a guy’s kilt three people, that’s pretty common. But a nice guy like you involved in this many killin’s? Why, I cain’t visualize it!”

“Well, if yew had a daddy that shot at yew,” Henley said darkly, “yew might could do some thangs, too.”

Young was impressed by the boy’s stoic acceptance of his fate. “He acted like a guy that’s goin’ to the penitentiary for the fifth time,” the detective said later. “Like nature was takin’ its course. Seemed he just enjoyed the attention, ridin’ there in the car with three detectives for his buddies.”

Only one subject seemed to disturb the young killer: homosexuality. He kept emphasizing his relations with females. “I had a girl fri’nd and I spent the whole night with her! Man, I’d sure like to be able to do that jes’ one more time.” He

seemed to be trying to impress the detectives with his manliness.

After a while, he began a disquisition on the physical difficulty of killing a human being. “Man, it’s hord!” he said. “It ain’t like on TV. Man, I choked one of ’em boys and he turned blue and gurgled, and I jes’ couldn’t kill him. He jes’ wouldn’t die! I went in and got Dean, and he come out and helped. Had to do two, three like ’at.”

It was late afternoon when the police cars reached Texas farm road 3185, three miles southwest of the small town of Broaddus near a summer community called Hickory Hollow. Lake Sam Rayburn, a man-made impoundment, was about two miles away, and the Corll cabin another two or three miles down the lake. At Henley’s direction, the cars made several wrong turns onto barely marked roads, losing an hour or so, and ended up on a bumpy dirt road parallel to a blacktop. Fresh rain had muddied the area, and the men got out and slogged into the darkening woods, Henley in the lead. He directed them to a mound in the middle of a small clearing about seventy yards off the road, and said tersely, “Billy’s buried there.”

A hound howled far away. “Billy who?” Young asked.

“Billy Lawrence.”

One of the detectives picked at the top of the mound and exposed a layer of leaves below a thin coating of dirt. About a foot below the leaves the officers hit a hard covering that turned their shovels aside. They pried up a board four feet square and came to a stratum of lime. Below the lime, about two feet in the earth, a large rock rested atop the chest of a rotting body wrapped in plastic.

Willie Young glanced at Henley, standing a few feet to one side. The boy seemed in distress. “If this bothers you,” Young said, “we kin go back to the road. We don’t have to stay here.”

“No,” Henley said in a choked voice, “it’ll be all rat.”

As night fell, the boy led the search party on another excursion through the woods—interrupted momentarily while a Ranger shot a rattlesnake. A second body, similarly wrapped and decomposed, was brought to the surface.

By this time, newsmen had arrived and several requested an interview. Henley spoke briefly, shielding his face from the cameras. He said, “These was jes’ some boys that Dean picked up, that I helped him git, ruther, and he raped ’em, ended up killin’ ’em, brought ’em down here and buried ’em.”

He was asked about his own role.

“I helped him pick ’em,” the boy said warily.

“What part did you play in the killing?” a TV reporter asked.

“No comment,” Henley said.

Another newsman asked the boy to explain his motivation. He said, “Dean had somethin’ over me,” but refused to elaborate.

The bodies were secured in zippered bags, and the group retired to the nearby town of San Augustine, where Henley was locked in a cell at the county jail. By this time he was acting morose and troubled, the opposite of his earlier behavior, and cried out for a doctor. Sheriff John Hoyt summoned a doctor to the jail, and the boy went to sleep under the influence of a tranquilizer and a sedative. The amiable sheriff sent out for whiskey, and the visiting detectives sat up till long past midnight, making notes and discussing the case.

Back in Houston, Lieutenant Breck Porter held his own briefing for the press. Boots propped on his desk, the crusty veteran leaned back and told reporters, “There’s no tellin’ how many bodies there are, ’cause where you’ve got a clown like this has been operatin’ over a period of four years—why, we know he’s been prankin’ with these teen-agers for at least that long, so no tellin’ how long this has been goin’ on, or how many that’s missin’ that’ll never be found.”

He was asked what advice he would give parents and children. “Well, we try to preach to our kids all the time,” he said, “but it’s pretty hard to tell your kids things like this ’cause in this day and time your kids know all the answers about everything, and think they do. This is the sort of thing that kin happen. Tell your kids: when you’re invited up to somebody’s apartment, you might never leave.”

The lieutenant said he doubted if the general public fully understood the nature of sex crimes. “Most people think this sex bit is perhaps like something I’d be involved in, you know? One of these wham bam thank you ma’am type things? And then you turn over and go to sleep? But it wasn’t that way. These ol’ clowns that go for these perverted-type sex acts, they go on for a period of two or three days. I’m sure there would be a certain amount of torture to the person it’s bein’ inflicted upon. It starts as a party. There’s really no violence connected, at first, just everybody have a good time. These kids wasn’t drug up there at the point of a gun or nothin’ like that. They was invited to a party. Hell, some of ’em *liked* it. Somebody’d take ’em home, and they didn’t *want* to go home, and they’d come back to the party. One of ’em came back nine times to party at Corll’s place, I understand. There was lots to eat, lots to drink, pills and marijuana, barbiturates, lacquer sniffin’, the whole bit. And then they’re crocked out, and they wake up and find themselves racked up on the board. Then the sex bit starts.”

At her neat house on Twenty-seventh Street, Mary Henley sobbed and said she

could not understand. “Dean treated Wayne like a son,” she said. “And Wayne loved him like a father. I know Dean must’ve done something terrible to make him shoot him.”

WHEN JIM TUCKER ARRIVED at headquarters early Friday morning, he found that David Brooks had been moved from the basement to a fifth-floor lockup for safekeeping. “Will you get my glasses?” Brooks asked. “I’m about blind without ’em.”

Tucker picked up the boy’s personal effects and escorted him from jail for an interrogation. “Man, that was scary,” Brooks said on the way to homicide.

“What was scary?” Tucker asked.

“When I woke up this morning, there was four, five cops outside the cell peeping in at me, and some of ’em was talking nasty. I didn’t know what they was gonna do; it scairt me half to death.”

“Well, did they do anything to you?”

“No. The sergeant come over and he was super-nice.”

In Tucker’s office, the two sat in silence for several minutes. Then the detective said, “You told me you’d tell me the whole truth today.”

“I know,” Brooks said, “but I’d like to wait for my daddy first.”

For a moment, Tucker was afraid the confession might be slipping away. “Well, now listen,” he said, “you said yesterday you were gonna tell me all about this today, and I *want* you to tell me all about it.”

“I’m going to!” Brooks said emphatically. “But I’d just like to wait till my daddy gets here.”

“Are you gonna make a statement?”

“Yes, I planned on it.”

“Well, look, it’s gonna take us two, three hours. So why don’t we type it now, and anything you say, even if it’s reduced to writing, it can’t be used against you unless you sign it.” Tucker was stretching the truth, but the district attorney was pressing for the confession.

Brooks pondered the suggestion, and at last agreed. Shortly after the process had begun, Alton Brooks knocked and entered. “I want you to tell ’em the truth!” he instructed his son in front of Tucker. “We’re gonna undo this thang, and we’re gonna try to identify all those boys we kin, and get this straightened out.” He left, and David resumed talking. He said that Corll engaged in homosexual activities with “a large number” of people, and always played the active role.

“He liked oral sex,” the boy said, “and he’d pay boys to come over and let him do it to them. That was his sex life. There was some boys that was involved with him for a long time; they kept coming back for more, and he kept paying ’em. But every once in a while he’d take a kid by force, and then he’d do oral sex and rectal sex and all kind of other things, and he’d wind up killing ‘em.”

Brooks said that the plywood board was used to hold the boys in position while Corll abused and murdered them. “Once they went on the board, they were as good as dead,” the young man said. “It was all over but the shouting and the crying. Most of the boys weren’t good boys. This is probably a cruel way to put it, it probably sounds terrible, but most of ’em wasn’t no great loss. They was in trouble all the time, dope fiends and one thing or another. I remember one kid, we all agreed after he was dead that he was a super-bad kid, and his people wasn’t gonna miss him no way.”

The talk went on for several hours, and gradually “Ol’ Fastfingers” produced several pages of typed confession. “I want you to read this carefully before you sign it,” Tucker said. “If there’s anything I got twisted up or backwards or anything, you just tell me, and we’ll correct it. But if it’s right, I want you to sign right here.”

Brooks picked up the pages and read :

The first killing that I remember happened when Dean was living at the Yorktown town house. There were two boys there and I left before they were killed. But Dean told me that he had killed them afterwards. I don’t know where they were buried or what their names were. The first few that Dean killed were supposed to have been sent off somewhere in California.

The first killing that I remember being present at was on 6363 San Felipe. That boy was Ruben Haney (Watson). Dean and I were the only people involved in that one. But Dean did the killing, and I was just present when it happened.

I also remember two boys who were killed at the Place One apartments on Mangum. They were brothers and their father worked next door where they were building some more apartments. I was present when Dean killed them by strangling them but again I did not participate. I believe that I was present when they were buried, but I don’t remember where they were buried. The youngest of these two boys is the youngest that was killed I think.

I remember one boy who was killed on Columbia at Dean’s house. This was just before Wayne Henley came into the picture. Dean kept this boy around the house for about four days before he killed him. I don’t remember his name but we picked him up on Eleventh and Rutland. I think I helped bury this boy also,

but I don't remember where it was. This was about two years ago. It really upset Dean to have to kill this boy because he really liked him.

A boy by the name of Glass was also killed at the Columbia address. I had taken him home one time, but he wouldn't get out because he wanted to go back to Dean's. I took him back and Dean ended up killing him.

Now that I think about it I'm not sure whether it was Glass that I took home or another boy. But I believe that it was Glass.

It was during the time that we were living on Columbia Street that Wayne Henley got involved. Wayne took part in getting the boys at first and then later he took an active part in the killings. Wayne seemed to enjoy causing pain and he was especially sadistic at the Schuler address.

Most of the killings that occurred after Wayne came into the picture involved all three of us. I still did not take part in the actual killing but nearly always all three of us were there.

I was present when Mark Scott was killed at the Schuler street address. I had told yesterday in my witness statement about Mark Scott being at the Schuler house but I did not say that I was present, which I was. Mark had a knife and he tried to get Dean. He swung at him with a knife and caught Dean's shirt and barely broke the skin. He still had one hand tied and Dean grabbed the hand with the knife. Wayne ran out of the room and got a pistol, and Mark just gave up. Wayne killed Mark Scott and I think that he strangled him. Mark was either buried at the beach or the boathouse.

There was another boy killed at the Schuler house, actually there were two at this time. A boy named Billy Baulch and a Johnny and I think that his last name was Malone. Wayne strangled Billy and he said "Hey Johnny" and when Johnny looked up Wayne shot him in the forehead with a .22 automatic. The bullet came out of his ear and he raised up and about three minutes later he said, "Wayne, please don't." Then Wayne strangled him, and Dean helped.

It was while we were living on Schuler that Wayne and Dean got me down and started to kill me. I begged Dean not to kill me and he finally let me go. I told about this in my witness statement and that part of my statement was absolutely true. It was also at this address that they got Billy Ridinger and what I said in my witness statement was true about him. I took care of him while he was there and I believe the only reason he is alive now is because I begged them not to kill him.

Wayne and Dean got one boy by themselves while we were on Schuler. It was a tall, skinny guy. I just happened to walk in the house and there he was. I left

before they killed this one.

In the first apartment we lived in at Westcott Towers I think that there were two boys killed. These were both young boys from The Heights area but I don't know their names. Wayne accidentally shot one of them. This was about seven A.M. I was in the other room asleep when this happened. Dean told me that Wayne had just come in waving the .22 and accidentally shot one of the boys in the jaw. The bullet just went in a little and then it was just under the skin. They didn't kill the boy right then. They killed these two boys later on that day.

Dean moved to the Princessa Apartments on Wirt and I remember him getting one boy there by himself. He wanted me to help him but I wouldn't do it. I didn't want to mess with this one because I had someplace I wanted to go so I tried to get him mad so he would leave but he wanted to stay.

Dean grabbed the boy and within three minutes of when he grabbed him I was gone. At that time I was using Dean's car so I was in and out all the time. After the Princessa Apartments Dean moved to Pasadena. I know of two that were killed there. One was from Baton Rouge and one was a small blond boy from South Houston. I saw the boy from South Houston for about forty-five minutes. I took him a pizza and then I left and he wanted me to come back. I wasn't there when either of these two boys were killed. I did come in just after Dean had killed the boy from Baton Rouge, that one was a different day from the blond boy.

In all, I guess there were between twenty-five and thirty boys killed and they were buried in three different places.

I was present and helped bury many of them but not all of them. Most of them were buried at the boat stall. There were three or four buried at Sam Rayburn, I think, I am sure that there are two up there. On the first one at Sam Rayburn I helped bury them. Then the next one we took to Sam Rayburn when we got there Dean and Wayne found that the first one had come to the surface and either a foot or a hand was above the ground. When they buried this one the second time they put some type of sheet on top of him to keep him down.

The third place that they were buried was on the beach at High Island. This was right off the Winnie exit where the road goes to the beach. You turn east on the beach road and go till the pavement changes which is about a quarter or a half of a mile and the bodies are on the right-hand side of the highway about fifteen or twenty yards off of the road. I never actually buried one here but I always drove the car. I know that one of the graves had a large rock on top of it. I think that there were five or more bodies buried at this location.

The bodies at the beach are in a row down the beach for perhaps half a mile or so. I am willing to show officers where this location is and I will try to locate as many of the graves as possible.

I regret that this happened and I'm sorry for the kids' families.

Brooks finished reading and put the statement down unsigned. "What's the matter?" Tucker asked. "Did I get it wrong?"

"No," the boy said. "I'd just like to talk to my father first."

The detective ushered Alton Brooks into the room and left the two alone. After a few minutes, the father came out and said to Tucker, "I'm gonna tell you what I asked mah son, and he's assured me. I've tole him to cooperate, and the only thang I wanted him to do was tell me he hadn't taken a human life." Tears formed in the man's eyes and his voice broke. "He's assured me that he hasn't, and I believe he's tellin' me the truth."

The two men walked back into the office, and with the father as a witness, David signed the statement. Alton's shoulders began to shake. "It's all right, Daddy," the boy said.

"No," Alton Brooks said, "it's not all right, son. I wouldn't blame some of them parents if they come up here and shot me." David tried to offer comfort, but his father cried on.

At their motel in the small town of San Augustine, the visiting Houston detectives were roused from their beds at 6:30 A.M. by the county sheriff. "Boy, they sure git up early around here!" Willie Young complained. He had scribbled the last word of his notes barely four hours earlier.

In the town square, the detectives found a posse of ten or twelve deputies drinking coffee from thermos jugs and waiting for full daylight. Wayne Henley was eager to go, refreshed by his night of barbiturated sleep. "Hey," he said to Willie Young, "yew 'member when I called for a doctor last evenin'? Well, I was jes' kiddin'. I felt fine all the time. I jes' wanted to see if y'all'd git one for me."

The boy's hot dark eyes glowered from under rumpled hair that covered his head in squiggly rat's tails. The group piled into cars and pickup trucks and drove to the Angelina National Forest and the tall pines, serene and aromatic. Crickets and cicadas whirred in the weeds, and somewhere in the distance a rooster cued the dawn. Two more bodies were found, numbers twenty and twenty-one of the case, teen-age boys like the others.

Wayne Henley waited in the back of an unmarked police car, his arms on his

knees, his head resting on his arms and moving rhythmically up and down, as though he were sobbing to himself. By this time Willie Young and his fellow officers had become accustomed to the young prisoner's mood swings, and they let him cry himself out. After the bodies had been removed to hearses and dispatched to the county medical examiner's office, reporters demanded interviews with the young killer. A sheriff's deputy conferred with Henley and then beckoned for silence. "He's perfectly willing to attempt to answer your questions," the deputy said. "Please don't crowd in. Take your time. Give him a little time to answer you, and don't shoot any pictures right in his face. This is his request."

The newsmen imploded on the car, and Henley, his eyes red and his face still damp, answered their questions in a singsong voice. It was plain that he was contemptuous of the whole process and eager to cut it short.

"Wayne, what happened here?" a reporter asked.

"Boys were buried," Henley snapped, as if to say that the question barely deserved an answer.

"Why were they buried here?"

"Dean Corll decided he wanted to have sex with 'em. They wouldn't let him, so he kilt 'em and brought 'em out here and buried 'em."

"Why here, Wayne?"

"His folks had a place out here. He said his boat storage place was full."

"How many more bodies do we have out here, Wayne?"

"None."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I'm *not* sure. None to mah knowledge."

"Were you aware what was going on for the last couple of years?"

"A year ago last winter."

"How many people did Dean tell you that he killed?"

"I cain't total it. Twenty-four, I believe."

"Did he pay you to bring the boys over to his house?"

"Suppose to have," Henley said disgustedly.

"Did he ever pay you?"

"No."

“Two hundred dollars?”

“That was the beginnin’ price.”

“Did he pay you *any?”*

“Some,” the boy said, contradicting himself.

“How did you meet Dean?”

“David Brooks.”

“Who else is involved that we could talk to that might shed some light on this?”

“No names anymore,” the boy said with the hauteur of a superior.

“Do you know where the bodies might be buried on High Island?”

“Approximately. I kin give ’em an area.”

“What area?”

Henley looked around, annoyed. He conveyed the impression that the press was intruding on a sacred relationship. “That’s between me and the police,” he said curtly.

“How have you been treated since you reached the San Augustine police department?” a local reporter asked.

“They’ve been great. Couldn’t ask for better.” For the first time in the interview, he sounded momentarily warm and friendly, but he quickly returned to his Olympian stance when a newsman asked how old the boys were.

“Teen-agers,” he said.

“Do you have a lawyer?”

“Somew’ar,” he said, in a tone that suggested his lawyer was no more competent than the press.

“Who is he?”

“No names.”

“Wayne, are you sorry about all this?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said impatiently.

“Wayne, were the boys dead when you brought them up here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How were they killed?”

“Shot, choked.”

“With a twenty-two?”

“Twenty-two.”

By now Henley was making it plain with his brusque answers that the interview was over, but the reporters bored in.

“Were they killed in Houston and then brought up to the San Augustine area?” someone called from the rear.

“These here, Pasadena.”

“Any of them knifed?”

“No.”

“What happened previous to the killings?”

Henley sighed. “He had sex with ’em,” he said.

“Is that all? Any torture?”

“Supposedly,” he said.

“What kind of torture?”

“Mostly jes’ pickin’. It wasn’t what yew would really call torture.”

“Describe it for us.”

Henley paused. “No details,” he snapped.

“Have you made a complete statement of all you can recall?”

“As complete as I could at the time.”

“Was this under any duress?”

“Any what?” A look of confusion crossed his face.

The reporter laughed and said, “There was no pressure, no force used on you?”

“No, sir.” The boy’s voice took on a cloying tone. “These men haven’t had to force me, haven’t had to holler at me, and I haven’t had any reason to feel bad at ’em.”

Another reporter wanted to know why he had phoned his mother two nights before and told her about killing Corll.

“She deserves to know,” he said in the familiar singsong delivery.

The reporter pressed the point. “She acted like she sort of knew the situation,” he said. “She wasn’t too surprised.”

Henley’s voice rose in annoyance. “That’s between me and her!” he said. “It’s none of yer business.”

“And your brothers were aware, too, weren’t they?” another newsman insisted.

“That’s none of yer business either!” Henley snorted.

“Wayne,” someone asked in a softer voice, “how do you feel about this whole ordeal?”

“Pretty grotesque.”

“What do you mean by that?” the same reporter asked.

Henley’s dark eyes blazed. “Do yew read the dictionary?” he said churlishly.

The reporter said, “No, I don’t—”

“Wayne,” another interrupted quickly, “you been carrying this around with you for a long time. Didn’t you almost crack several times?”

“Yep,” the boy said softly.

“How come this time?”

“This time,” he said in a voice quaking with self-pity, “I just haven’t felt like I was gonna be able to hold mah sanity much longer.”

“What provoked you that night for you to decide to tell it all?”

“I jes’ think I owe these people this much,” he answered piously, “to let ’em know what’s happened to their boys.”

“How do you feel about it now?”

Henley seemed genuinely disturbed by the question. “I don’t know how to put it,” he said.

“These boys out here, are they from the Houston area?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you and the other gentleman pick them all up and take ’em to this house, or did the other fellow get some of them?”

“He got some.”

“But you took most of them?”

“Oh, he was with us.”

“What did you tell these boys when you took them there?”

“Gonna go visit, party a li’l”

“Did you have any girls?”

“No.”

‘Is it true he got mad because you brought a girl that last time?”

“Yes. I brought the girl to keep her while she run away. There was no bad

intentions to her." Detectives nodded. Henley had told them several times earlier that he wanted to correct any false impressions about Rhonda's behavior, that she was a good, moral person and his own motivation had been strictly to help her.

"But this is the first time you took a girl, right?" a newsman asked.

"I've taken girls there before. I've never tried to *keep* one there." Something amused him, and he laughed.

"Why was he angry this time?"

"I wasn't suppose to brought her till the seventeenth."

"What was gonna happen on the seventeenth?"

"That's when she decided that's when she wanted to run away. She said the seventeenth, the week afterwards. I don't know whar' she picked the date."

"Wayne," a dogged reporter broke in, beckoning toward the pine forest, "are there more bodies in there?"

"In whar'?"

"In the woods."

"Not to mah knowledge."

"Who would know, Wayne?"

"Dean Corll."

"Anybody else?"

He reverted to the clipped delivery. "No more names."

"Did you ever bring your brothers over to Dean's house?"

"No. My li'l brother Paul had been there at Westcott in Houston mebbe onct, mebbe twice."

"What kind of man was Dean?"

"Dean was a nice—He was reserved, quiet, enjoyed hisself. The man that did these killin's was somethin' else."

"Your mother said he was like a father to you. Is that the way you depict him?"

Henley pondered the question. "*Ummmmm*, no, it was more of a brother-type person, somebody I could talk to."

"Apparently you respected Dean."

"At one time," he said in the manner of a person who has been seriously let down by a friend.

“Then why did you kill him?”

The boy answered in a higher pitch, as though defending himself against an outrageous charge. “I was tired of him doin’ thangs like that, and it was either me or him rat then.”

“Did you ever try to talk him out of this?”

“Yes.”

“What’d he say?”

“Oh, he would go so far and then he’d drop it. A little bit later he’d come up again.” Reporters guessed that Henley meant Corll would come up to The Heights again, looking for boys.

“Do you think that sometimes he was a different person? How did he change? What caused the change sometimes?”

“He had a lust for blood,” Henley said slowly.

“When you didn’t get paid after bringing the boys there, why didn’t you stop?”

There was a long silence, and the boy said, “No comment.”

“Wayne, how often were there parties?”

“Whenever we’d git ready to.” He was beginning to sound bored and truculent once more. But when a reporter asked how the parties were financed, his voice took on a note of self-satisfaction. “Dean didn’t necessarily finance all these parties,” he said. “Now David Brooks lived most of his life off Dean, but *I* worked.”

“Where did you work?”

“In different places.”

“Dean,” a confused newsman asked, “were there drugs involved in these murders?”

Henley pounced. “I’m *Wayne,”* he said sarcastically.

“Wayne,” another reporter asked, “were most of the people homosexual?”

A sheriff’s deputy held up his hand and said, “That’s enough, gentlemen.”

“That’s—No comment,” Henley said as he slumped back on the seat of the car.

The beach at High Island lay three hours to the south of Lake Sam Rayburn, and Willie Young and the Pasadena detectives decided it was time to begin the long drive to the next burial site. On the way, Henley talked with the lawmen and soon regained his good spirits. “He seemed to like it in the car, surrounded by detectives, jawin’ his head off,” Young said later. “He acted like a li’l ol’

puppy."

The driver stopped for gas and Young bought a copy of the Beaumont *Enterprise* with its massive front-page coverage of the case. "Hey, lemme see that!" Henley said. "I unnerstan' the papers been sayin' some wrong thangs." Willie Young handed over the front section, and the boy began reading excitedly, interrupting himself every paragraph or two with a complaint.

"Lookee here!" he said. "Why, this makes Rhonda sound like a whore! That's unfa'r! That's not true!"

Young saw that the boy was becoming agitated again, and regretted letting him read the newspaper.

"And lookee here!" Henley went on. "Isn't that the most disgustin' thang yew ever saw?"

"What?" Willie Young asked.

"They wrote my name without the 'Junior' on it," Henley said. "Look! Calls me Elmer Wayne Henley. *Elmer Wayne Henley!* That's my daddy!"

The boy perused the articles several times, and gradually his ire seemed to fade. He laughed and showed Young an item about the pleasures of middle age. "I know I'm gonna be sent away," he said, "and I'll be about forty when I git out. Mebbe they'll take me in the Army."

It was nearly noon when the car crossed the Intracoastal Waterway and approached the village of High Island. The community water tower, a dull silver-gray against the Gulf sun, bore the word "CARDINALS" splotched in maroon paint. Black Angus and whitefaced Hereford cattle munched lazily in meadows dotted with steel "nodding horses," sucking the final drops of oil from an old wildcat field that was nearly played out. Most of the habitations were on stilts or pilings. High Island was anything but high; it was a foot or two above sea level, and an occasional hurricane sent sheets of salt water cascading across the meadows. The downtown section consisted of a handful of commercial establishments flanking the two-lane Highway 124. Babineaux's, an overgrown tin shack partly covered with flaking paint, advertised "DANCING NIGHTLY." The sign on a bait shack read "SHRIMP SQUID MULLET," and in the front window of Nancy's Cafe a cardboard placard reminded citizens that "THE REVELATIONS, GOSPEL MUSIC EVANGELISTS, ARE COMING TO THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, HIGH ISLAND." The Revelations were from Lake Charles, Louisiana, a two-hour drive around the scimitar curve of the Gulf. It was not every weekend that High Island's three hundred citizens could look forward to live entertainment from out of town.

At twenty minutes after noon, the police cars, now joined by a group of press and television vehicles, pulled up at Nancy's for lunch. Twenty-five minutes later, a car carrying David Brooks and detectives Jack Hamel and Jim Tucker arrived from Houston, followed by a car with Danny James and another homicide detective and four trusties, followed by a long string of vehicles belonging to the news media. After a soggy luncheon of hamburgers eaten from paper bags, the caravan headed toward the beach, two miles south. Taking directions from Henley and Brooks, the drivers followed Highway 124 to its junction with the beach road, SH 87, and then turned east along the Gulf, passing a sign that warned: "SH 87 may be subject to flooding and debris next twenty miles."

They drove parallel to the beach, and at a signal from Henley they parked on the shoulder and walked down a sandy path through a narrow strip of salt grass to the beach. The Gulf was rinse-water brown, riding in small waves driven by a southerly breeze, coughing up Portuguese men-of-war and punch-drunk baitfish and bits of shell and flotsam. A line of rusty froth marked the upper limits of the littoral, and there were bits of plastic, various seaweeds and jellyfish cadavers, egg cartons, lengths of old rope, a Lone Star beer bottle, and a bleaching cypress stump half buried in the sand. Just outside the small breakers, chrome mullet jumped, harried by speckled trout and redfish, and a solitary fisherman cast a silver spoon.

The two prize prisoners, surrounded by officers to buffer them from the curious, said that Corll had taken them to the beach five or six months before and pointed out a place where he had buried a body by himself. Brooks said that the spot was "where the highway changes color, just beyond, and then down along the grass line." While Henley hiked up the beach to look for another burial site, Brooks walked along the ridge that marked the boundary line between sand and salt grass. He came to a small cement block and bent over for a closer look. "I'm purty sure that's it," he said, "but I'd like to look some more."

"Just take your time," Tucker said. "We're not going anywhere."

"I want to be sure what I'm showing you," the blond boy said.

"Fine with us," said Jack Hamel. "It's a nice day for a stroll." The temperature was in the nineties, the air was oppressively wet, and there was no shade. The detectives wore their customary uniforms of suits, shirts and ties. It was anything but a nice day for a stroll, under the circumstances, but Hamel wanted to give Brooks total leeway. In court later, it would be important that the boys had found the graves entirely on their own, without prodding or hinting or outside

assistance. On such legal nuances, whole cases were won and lost, and murderers as guilty as Jack the Ripper sometimes slipped their bonds. Hamel and Tucker, the old pros, were aware of their responsibilities.

“I’m purty sure this is it,” Brooks repeated after poking around in the tall grass for a few more minutes. “But I don’t want y’all to start digging for nothing. I don’t want to disappoint you. Y’all’ve been real nice to me.”

“See?” Tucker quipped to Hamel. “Didn’t I tell you everybody likes a fat man?”

They walked back to the cement rock. “This is it,” Brooks said definitely. “I’m sure.” Under the rock, there appeared to be a caked black substance. Tucker nudged it lightly with his shoe tip and a piece broke off. The inside of the fragment was pure white.

“Lime?” Tucker asked Hamel.

“Lime,” his partner answered.

By now the group had been joined by local deputies, and one of them started digging without waiting for the trusties. In a few dips of the shovel he brought a patch of plastic into view. In a grave about two feet deep and three or four feet wide, the party found a skeleton the size of a teen-age boy’s, with strands of dark wet hair adhering to the skull. The body was entirely wrapped in plastic and tied like a package. Most of the skeleton fell apart when the outside cords were cut, but the feet were almost intact, as though a sculptor had roughed them out in clay. A coroner’s assistant said the boy might have been buried with his shoes on, creating a preservative effect. No clothes or personal effects were visible.

About two hundred feet up the beach, in an area where Wayne Henley said he remembered helping to bury bodies, a small grader chiseled at a strip of sand until it uncovered a patch of white. The body below was unwrapped; it had a full set of teeth with a few gold fillings, and black hair so long that detectives theorized that this twenty-third victim might be a girl. A morgue assistant took a close look and announced that they had found another teen-age male.

The press and spectators were being restrained by policemen and deputies, and the beach scene was still relatively placid. Several times Henley started to say something to Willie Young, but each time he stopped.

“Come on, come on,” Young said smilingly. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I was thinkin’,” the boy said. “When those people git down on the beach here, some kook’s gonna kill me. All it’d take is a rifle and jes’ git off at a distance, ya know?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Young said. “Me and my buddies, we’re not about to

let anybody kill *you.*" Together with two Pasadena detectives, he stayed close to the boy as they walked back to the police car to meet the press. While newsmen ringed the car six deep, Henley carefully kept the door between himself and the throng and said in a commanding manner that he wanted to make a few corrections for the record. Some of the newspaper accounts, he said in a drill sergeant's delivery, contained "downright lies." He seemed especially interested in denying that he had mentioned David Brooks to the police. "When that boy turned hisself in," Henley said, "I had not yet made a statement. I didn't make a statement till after he made his. So *I* didn't implicate *him.* He hung hisself! That's all I want to say." As an afterthought, he growled, "I never said there were thirty people. I said twenty-four. The name's Junior, not Elmer Wayne Henley." He looked out over the dozens of photographers, turned his profile toward the Gulf, and issued a final command: "Git yer pictures!"

After the press conference, the two boys walked with deputies about a mile down the beach to a cedar brake, while reporters and cameramen struggled in the sand to keep up. Henley removed his shirt, exposing a tanned, scrawny chest, and took charge of the expedition. He picked up a stick from the wrack and postured and strutted for the cameras: a harlequin with acne. "Point out a grave, Wayne!" a photographer shouted.

"Yes, sir; yes, sir!" Henley said, glad to oblige. He held the stick like a dowsing rod and mugged gleefully when it seemed to pull his thin wrist downward. "Here's yew one!"

Cameras clicked, more poses were requested, and the young man continued his histrionics, while David Brooks sat at the edge of the grass, bemused. Jim Tucker came huffing up, and Henley called out, "Hey, ya wanna run a foot race?" Tucker made a face, and the boy broke into peals of laughter.

"You enjoying yourself?" Tucker asked.

"Come on!" Henley said. "Let's have a nice race up the beach!" The sweating detective declined the invitation.

After a while, work crews began sifting through the sand while the grader stripped a shallow ditch along the salt grass. The two boys sat on a piece of driftwood and talked to Detective Danny James. "Hot," James commented. "I sure could use a beer."

Henley said impassionately, "Boy, me too! Hey, whyn't yew go buy a six-pack?"

James laughed wryly. "Sure," he said. "That'd be just dandy. Do you know what the press'd do if I bought beer for two minor boys?"

“Yeh,” Henley said, as Brooks nodded. “I guess I do.”

“But I sure could use one,” Danny James mused.

“Me too,” Henley said again. “Man, I jes’ don’t know where I’d be today if it wasn’t for beer!”

As James pondered the various definitions of success, young Henley jumped to his feet and raced away, still bare-chested, to help his new friends from the police department. The taciturn Brooks asked for a cigaret, and, at James’s subtle urging, began to talk slowly. “The youngest kid Dean kilt was about nine,” he said after a while. “His daddy run a grocery across the street from where Dean was living.”

“I saw your statement,” James said after another silence. “Is it true that one kid said something after he was shot in the head?”

“You mean Johnny?” Brooks said. “Johnny Malone, Johnny Dalone, something like that. Yeh, it’s true. Billy Baulch was already laying dead in the bed, and I was sitting there talking to Johnny, trying to keep him calm, because he went wild when he seen the strangling. He knew he was fixing to go himself. Wayne snuck back and hollered, ‘Hey, Johnny!’ and when he turned around Wayne shot him in the face, and he fell over. About a minute later he raised up and he says, ‘Please, Wayne, *don’t!’* Wayne had to choke him.”

“Must take a lotta strength,” James said innocently.

“Oh, Wayne’s strong, all right,” Brooks said. “So was Dean. That Dean, he was powerful strong! When we’d come down here to bury a body, I’d stay in the car, and ol’ Dean, he’d put two shovels under one arm and a body under the other and just walk right on down to the beach, like he was carrying a fishing rod or something.”

After another hour had passed without any new discoveries, the party moved several more miles along the beach to a place where Henley said two boys had been buried in 1972. By 4 P.M., nothing more had turned up, despite Henley’s protestations that there were at least six bodies buried on High Island, and the detectives put their prisoners into the police cars and headed back toward Houston, leaving several hundred spectators discussing what they had seen.

A woman was in tears. “It makes a mother really be thankful for the grace that God has given ’em, ’cause it could be mine layin’ right there,” she said. “I have a son almost fourteen. Thank God! But I’m so sad for the family. For the others that has done it, Lord forgive ’em, ’cause they didn’t know what they’re doing. Oh, God, how sad that is!” She started to cry aloud.

A middle-aged man said he had lived on High Island all his life, and he had every intention of enjoying the beach just as he had in the past. “The beach didn’t do this,” he said in a sermonizing manner. “It was them newcomers from Houston.”

Two boys of twelve or thirteen exchanged observations. “It stunk like crazy!” one of them said. “Just bones, and you could see his ha’r. Looked like a Messican.”

“Awful!” the other boy said. “I seen it dug up. It had hair, and a little bit of flesh on his arms. This was the first dead body I ever seen. I hope I don’t see no more.”

In Houston that afternoon, Dean Arnold Corll was buried in Grand View Memorial Park. While his father and mother and a few dozen others looked on, a Methodist preacher offered words of consolation. “No matter how much we love our children,” he said, “we must let them go and not feel guilty for what they make of their lives. Now we deliver this man unto God’s judgment and also his mercy and grace. And I commend the family to the same mercy and grace because they must now live with the things that will be said. The greatest heroism is just going on and remembering that Christ came to the world to love those whom others despised.”

The service lasted less than fifteen minutes. There was no music. The American flag that draped the coffin was folded and presented to the bereaved father.

A native of France, Charles Cuin, shook his head and expressed bafflement after the ritual. Cuin told reporters he had been naturalized for only three months, and he was still learning American ways. “I can’t understand,” he said. “You bury this guy and put an American flag on his casket like everything is normal?”

That evening there was a torrent of hot words in Houston. When Jack Hamel and Jim Tucker returned to headquarters from their enervating day in the sun, a young assistant district attorney asked them, “Why did you give out the Brooks confession?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tucker said, his usual good spirits failing him.

“Well, somebody gave it to the press!” the prosecutor insisted.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tucker said. “I gave it to the lieutenant, and he promised it wouldn’t be released, and then I left for High Island.”

When the assistant DA persisted, Tucker brushed him aside and snapped, “I’m tired. Get outa my way!”

As the two detectives walked into the homicide office, they noticed extra teams answering telephone calls. The usually orderly office looked like a stock brokerage on a hectic afternoon.

“What’s happenin’?” Hamel asked a detective.

“The Brooks confession got out. Everybody recognizes his missing kid in it. There was a call from Hawaii. One from Canada. And they’re all sore. They want to know why we didn’t inform ’em.”

A few minutes later, the beleaguered Tucker found himself in debate with another representative of the district attorney’s office.

“Listen,” the DA’s man said, “we have a lot of bodies, but we don’t have Brooks connected with any one of ‘em. We’ve got to have Brooks identify at least one body himself, or else we can’t file charges on him.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of!” Tucker said. “That’s the other way around from the usual way. We’ve got bodies that these boys directed us to, and they said they were present when these bodies were killed. What more do you need?”

“Identifications,” the DA’s assistant said. “Brooks has to say that’s so-and-so, and we killed him.”

“Well, what’s in a name?” Tucker said. “You can go to court and change your name.”

“Look, we need another statement from Brooks, and we need it now.”

“Ol’ Fastfingers” lost the argument. He trudged back to the jail and checked out David Brooks, busy talking to his father. “David,” he said, “I know you’re tired, and I am too, but we have to talk some more.” He paraded the boy before a magistrate for another declaration of his legal rights, and afterward Alton Brooks told the detective, “Mah boy lived mostly with Dean Corll and his mother, and I didn’t get to see much of him. But no matter what happens, I’ll be here with mah son. This is a terrible thang that brings us together, but I feel closer now than I ever did before.”

Tucker took the boy into a private office and showed him a picture of Billy Lawrence, given to the police several weeks earlier by an aunt who was worried about his absence. “Recognize him?” Tucker asked.

“Yeh,” Brooks said. “He’s one of the kids that was kilt. I don’t know his name, but I remember the whole thing.”

Brooks initialed the photograph for identification, and then he and Tucker sat up till late in the evening preparing a statement. Around eleven o’clock, the fastest

typist in homicide handed a typewritten sheet to Brooks and told him to read it for accuracy. A few minutes later, the boy gave the paper back and said, “I can’t sign this.”

“What’s the matter?” the dismayed Tucker said.

“Down here,” David said. “Look. Where I’m talking about the boys getting kilt, and I say, ‘I just didn’t like to do it myself.’ That’s not right.”

“Well, what *is* right?”

“Put down ‘I just *wouldn’t* do it myself,’” the boy instructed. “And put down ‘And I never did do it myself.’”

Tucker X’ed out the offending passage and inserted the proper words, and Brooks initialed the corrections and signed his name. The detective reread the evening’s work:

About July 10th, 1973, I tried to call Dean’s house, Dean Corll, and it was a long time before I could get him or anyone to answer. Finally, Wayne answered and I asked him if they had anyone there and he said yes. I asked him “It’s not a friend, is it?” and he said “Sort of.” He wouldn’t tell me who it was so I went over there just to see who it was. He was still alive when I got there but he was tied to the bed. I recognized him only as a friend of Wayne’s.

The boy wasn’t doing anything but lying there when I got there. He didn’t have any clothes on. I don’t remember them calling him by name but I have just now been shown a picture of him which I will initial with this date and time and it is the same boy I have been talking about. In fact, I have seen this same picture before at Dean’s house.

I was tired so I went to bed in the opposite bedroom. Before I did go to bed I took Wayne home. Then I went back to Dean’s house and went to bed. The boy was still alive but Dean was awake because I remember he let me in. The next morning I went back to get Wayne and Dean was supposed to pay me ten dollars for doing this but he never did. That is, the ten dollars was for taking Wayne home the night before.

I’m not sure about the time but I think it was the next evening when Wayne’s mother called, insisting Wayne come home but he told her no, that he was going to the lake for a couple of days. The boy was still alive. We left about six P.M. to go to the lake and I know he was dead and in a box when we left so I must have been there when he was killed because I didn’t leave to go anywhere before we left for the lake. However, I do not remember how he was killed. I don’t know if I saw it or not. It didn’t bother me to see it. I saw it done many times. I just

wouldn't do it myself. And I never did do it myself.

We left for the lake about six P.M., and got there about nine-thirty or quarter to ten. We then went fishing. Wayne and me. This was after we slept. We fished from about six-thirty A.M. to ten A.M. Dean told us he had already picked a spot and started digging, but he actually hadn't done very much.

When Wayne and I got back from fishing, we ate and I went to sleep. I slept until about five P.M. and then Dean and I dug the grave. Wayne was keeping lookout in the van. The spot was by a trench near a dirt road. It was probably a few miles from Lake Sam Rayburn itself.

We took the body out of the box, that is, Dean did, and I held the boy's feet about halfway to the grave. The body was already wrapped in plastic. I went back to the van to get the carpet and a flashlight. The carpet is to shovel extra dirt on and take it someplace else so there wouldn't be a mound showing.

I almost took too much dirt off and Dean griped at me for it.

"You're sure it's okay now?" Tucker asked.

"It's okay now," Brooks said.

"Well, let's go back to jail." He returned the blond-haired boy to his cell and headed toward homicide.

"Hey," Brooks called out. "Hey, come here a minute."

"Yeh?" Tucker asked.

"Listen, will you come back and see me tomorrow morning? I mean, I'd really 'predate it. I really don't like to sit in jail all the time."

Tucker knew he faced another couple of hours writing supplementaries on the case, and he would not reach home till at least 3 A.M. "Okay," he said, and returned to his tyrant typewriter.

Late that night, Horace "Jimmy" Lawrence was sitting alone in his cottage on Thirty-first Street, a few blocks north of The Heights, when the telephone rang. "Jimmy," a friend said anxiously, "I'm sorry. I was so shocked to hear about Billy."

"Whatcha mean?" Jimmy said. As far as he knew, Billy was still working in Austin, and would soon be back for school.

"They found Billy's body up at Lake Sam Rayburn!" the woman said.

Lawrence said slowly, "What the hail are you talking about?"

"Oh, my God, Jimmy, you didn't *know?"* the anguished woman said. "You wait

right there! I'll be over."

Jimmy sat alone, puzzled by the conversation. He decided that the upset woman must have heard a garbled news report, or perhaps was under the influence. Jimmy Lawrence knew that his son's body had not been found at Lake Sam Rayburn or anyplace else. If it had, he would have heard from his friends in the Houston police department. Lawrence had once been a deputy sheriff, and he knew dozens of lawmen. If anything went wrong, he would be one of the first to find out.

The phone rang again, and another friend offered condolences.

"Man, what are you *talking* about?" Jimmy said. "Where are you hearing all this?"

"On the radio, Jimmy," the man said. "They said Billy's body was found up in San Augustine County."

Lawrence put through a call to John Hoyt, sheriff of San Augustine. "John, what's going on up there?" he asked.

"You mean you haven't heard?" Hoyt said. "They think they found your boy."

"They couldn'ta found my boy," Jimmy Lawrence said. "He's got him a job over at Austin."

"Well, give me his description," the sheriff said. Minutes later he returned to the phone. "Jimmy," he said gently, "they say the body has that same little V in the front teeth. And you know the young fellow that showed 'em where to dig? Wayne Henley? Well, he said that Billy was one of the boys they killed."

Lawrence was stunned. It seemed impossible, but Hoyt sounded positive. "Jimmy," Hoyt said again, "I hate to be the one to tell you, but they know for sure. One of the bodies is your son."

Jimmy put the phone down in a daze. He sat in his darkened living room and waited for his friends, and by the time they arrived, he was doubled over with asthma.

ON SATURDAY MORNING, Jim Tucker rolled over in bed and thought about driving downtown to pay his promised visit to David Brooks. Like most of the other detectives involved in the case, he was off duty over the weekend, and he was exhausted from the heavy action of the last two days. He rolled over and went back to sleep; David Brooks would have to wait. Almost the entire homicide division stayed home that weekend, resting in the knowledge that the bodies were going nowhere, the culprits were either dead or in custody, and Monday would be soon enough to get back on the case.

ON MONDAY MORNING, a digging party under the direction of a country sheriff named Louis Otter convened at High Island beach under the watchful eyes of several hundred reporters, cameramen and spectators and four or five helicopters carrying television newsmen. The sheriff, a lean middle-aged man in straw hat and boots and a thick leather belt with his name hammered into it, strutted around emitting local color. A national news correspondent asked him what was on the schedule.

"Well, me and them deputies gonna play marbles, and the rest of these guys gonna work," Otter said in his Texas tidewater accent "I'm gonna win, 'cause I was marble kang when I went to skewl."

He spoke above the noise of a Galion 118 road grader, ten feet high with a twelve-foot blade, its Diesel exhaust stack emitting smoke and its eggyolk-yellow frame shivering from one end to the other with restrained power. "Now 'member," the sheriff shouted at the hard-hatted driver, "we ain't gonna dig it all! If we did, we'd be here till David blowed his trumpet."

A deputy reported that civilian cars were parked along the strip where the machine was going to trench. "Deputy," Otter drawled, "go up and git those cars moved offa there, and if they don't move, jes' let that blade run rat over 'em." He turned to the man jouncing atop the grader. "Got the idee?" he barked. "You're the boss. You're gonna have to move a lot of sand today. Lay it up!"

The machine chugged over to the line where the salt grass met the sandy beach and began slicing a layer while the sheriff and a deputy followed in an open Jeep looking for streaks of lime or remnants of the dead. About thirty yards east of the two Friday graves, the blade ripped out a hank of black hair and a leg bone, and a digging party exhumed the jumbled remains of a boy.

Two miles up the beach, in another county, a truck driver took a deputy to a spot where he had observed mysterious goings on about eight months before. He had noticed a car stuck in the sand, and when he had offered assistance, a young man who looked like Wayne Henley had rudely waved him away. The incident stuck in his mind, and he pointed out a mound near the same spot. A long stick was inserted deep into the sand and an unmistakable odor wafted into the breeze. Three feet down, at the edge of the salt grass, a work crew unearthed the body of another young man, hands folded and tied across his stomach, ankles crossed and bound tightly. The boy wore blue jeans, and one pocket was crammed with hand-loaded rounds of .270 caliber ammunition. A pair of scissors hung from his belt. The cause of death was apparent: four or five heavy-caliber slugs had torn the boy's rib cage apart. Detectives theorized that the victim had been hunting at

the beach, had stumbled on a burial scene, and had been executed with his own rifle. The truck driver who pointed out the spot was lucky to be alive.

The discoveries of Monday morning brought the total number of bodies to twenty-five, the same number attributed to the farmlabor foreman Juan Corona in California. “That ties Corona!” a newspaperman said excitedly. Later in the day, diggers uncovered a pair of bodies lashed together with cord, one atop the other, the skulls wrapped in plastic, not far from where Sheriff Otter and his men had been searching in the morning. Now Texas had the modern American murder record all to itself.

Detectives called on Wayne Henley and David Brooks in their cells that evening, but the twin waterfalls of self-incrimination had dried. Both suspects had seen lawyers; both had been advised to shut up. “Henley’s a sick man, physically and mentally,” his lawyer said. “I talked to the man, and his actions, prior to and during the whole bizarre events, just point to an extremely diseased mind, with periods where he’s lucid.” Brooks’s lawyer simply noted, “My client will have nothing more to say.”

Henley complained that prisoners were calling him names and cursing him; he said he feared for his life. That night he was transferred to solitary confinement in Houston, and within five minutes every prisoner knew he was there. The opening price on his head was one hundred dollars, a king’s ransom in jailhouse currency.

Good Dude's Good Times

The imagination will not down. If it is not a dance, a song, it becomes an outcry, a protest. If it is not flamboyance it becomes deformity; if it is not art, it becomes crime.

—William Carlos Williams, *The Great American Novel*, 1923

ONE BY ONE THE LOST BOYS OF The Heights were accounted for, either in the revelations of Wayne Henley and David Brooks or on the cold slabs in the medical examiner's laboratory, where the macabre process of identification proceeded under forced draft. As the list of known victims lengthened, the connection with the old neighborhood showed up clearly. Two skeletons from the shed turned out to be young brothers whose parents now lived in Georgia, but who had lived in The Heights in 1971, when the boys had disappeared. Another victim had lived in a trailer court off the northwest corner of The Heights, and two more had been last seen at a religious rally just west of the area. Of the first twenty bodies that were positively identified, only three of the victims lacked a Heights connection: one had been picked up while hitchhiking, another had met Henley at driving school and been invited to "a party," and a third had vanished while bicycling near Corll's house in Pasadena.

Each day the local newspapers recorded the latest developments in depth, and TV and radio stations aired "specials" and extended coverage. Certain Houstonians were mortified. It seemed to the well-entrenched booster-and-boomer set that extensive damage was being done by this suppurating boil oozing up through the city's layer of pancake make-up. They told each other defensively that a lunatic could appear anywhere; The Bayou City had no monopoly on mental illness. Larger questions were ignored: Should a lunatic have been able to run off a string of twenty-seven murders before being exposed, and then only accidentally? Or was there something about Houston and The Heights uniquely conducive to such an unrelieved succession of horrors?

The establishment pulled its wagons into a circle. Local pundits who once had raged at the city's violence fell strangely silent, as though there were no further civic lessons to be learned from the case. A visiting reporter called the Chamber of Commerce for the latest population figures and was asked who wanted to

know and why. When he said that he was preparing a national article on the murders, the chamber spokesman said, “Well, we don’t have a thing to do with *that!”*

Officials of the Houston Lighting & Power Company, the privately owned utility where Dean Corll had worked, turned reporters away at the door, refusing to discuss any aspect of the case. When a long-haired correspondent from New York appeared in The Heights to ask questions, he was called “a pill freak, a drug addict and a faggot” and was ordered away at gunpoint. One by one the normal news sources were embarrassed into reticence. Relatives of Henley, Brooks and Corll went into tight seclusion, and lawyers for the two young prisoners maintained a policy of total silence. Newsmen who had arrived from as far away as Tokyo and Berlin threw up their hands and went home, leaving the biggest questions of all still unanswered:

Who was Dean Corll? What was he?

The first public information about the former relay tester and candymaker had come in expressions of shock and dismay from people who could not picture him as a cold, maniacal killer. “My folks knew Dean,” a young man said in an aggrieved tone on an FM radio interview. “All my friends knew him, and my friends’ folks knew him, and they never thought anything about him until all this came out in the papers, and then they started looking down on him, which I don’t go for at all. Before that, they always thought Dean was a good dude. He’d help me, he’d help them, anything. And now they put him down so bad it’s unreal. I mean, it really pisses me off that they think he’s just some kind of sadistic killer, and forget all the good about him.”

A friend had a perplexing theory: “The police, they’ve dug up twenty-seven bodies. I think they’re content with that; they want to stop ’cause they’ve beat the record in the United States. There may be more, but they’re just trying to build this up to where they’ve got the biggest mass murder right here in Houston.” There were other implied suggestions that poor Dean Corll was somehow the victim of a malicious publicity campaign, or a stab in the back by his accomplices. “Dean’s dead,” an old friend summed up, “and those boys could blame everything on Dean, and they’d be in the clear.”

The laconic Lieutenant Breckenridge Porter took note of the statements and said in his customary drawl, “They’re ignorin’ a few factors. This goes back a long time, three years, probably more. Dean Corll’s a thirty-three-year-old man. They say that Henley and Brooks pushed him into this and they was usin’ him as a patsy and all that bullshit. Why, Corll was a big strappin’ man, and three years

ago Henley and Brooks was a couple li'l snottynose punks!"

A highly respected newsman, Dave Lamble of KAUM-FM, Houston, scored an early coup by producing a nineteen-year-old homosexual who professed to have had a three-month love affair with the dead killer. Using the assumed name "Guy," the young man told of meeting Corll in a supermarket bathroom. "Dean made a play for me and I told him I just wasn't interested at all," Guy said, "and then again he made his play and he followed me for about three blocks, and he just wanted to talk. I said okay, and we became extremely close friends."

A week after the chance encounter, Guy continued, Corll called and invited him to spend the night in Pasadena. "He showed me around the house, then he pointed to this one door and he said, 'I'll never take you in there!' Later on that night we did go to bed together. He didn't force me or he didn't edge me into it. He said, 'If you want to, you can, and if you don't want to, we don't have to.' He made it *my* decision. I did go to bed with him. He didn't want to hurt me. He kept telling me, 'If I'm doing anything to hurt you or if I ever do anything to hurt you, let me know.' He was just an extremely gentle Teddy-bear-type person to me." Guy said he never learned the mystery of the closed room.

After that first evening at Corll's home, the lovers met once or twice a week to talk, usually in a small park. "He'd just talk about how people can get other people to do things, and how it was really sad that people were forced to do things that they really didn't want to do. He talked several times about his mother, but this was personal and private. There was some unhappy experiences he told about." Judging by the conversations, Corll knew his way around the homosexual community in Houston, but by personal choice was not a member in good standing. "He was very critical about several places, saying that he doesn't like bars," Guy told Lamble. "He was critical about one of the steam rooms and baths. He mentioned that this place was physically dirty, or very unclean. He mentioned that at this place the people seemed to be, as he put it, flaming faggots, bartenders were B-I-T-C-H-E-S, and he didn't like this place and he didn't like that place."

After a while, Guy began to notice that there were broad areas of Corll's life that were being left out of the discussions. "One time he wanted to tell me something, and then he said that he couldn't tell me because he knew that it would hurt me very badly. I never knew *anything* that he did. He was sort of like in a cloud of mystique; he was just *there.* Seemed like he had another life he would go to that I was not part of, and then he would travel over into this one and I was part of it, and I never tried to infiltrate his other domain. He seemed to set up a barrier and wanted me to stay on one side. The other aspects of his life

were taboo. I knew he had a friend named Wayne, but every time I'd bring up his friends, he'd more or less just cut 'em off, as though they were nonexistent. And he *never* wanted me to meet them."

Guy soon realized that his new friend was deeply troubled, that his life was at a critical juncture. "He felt like an outcast, especially agewise. He was hypersensitive about his age, how he looked, if he was young-looking, if he was physically good-looking, if he had maybe something a little bit wrong with his hair. He'd always want compliments, or he'd want constructive criticism. At times he would be totally childlike and rambunctious and crazy. He wanted to be in with the youthful crowd; he'd show it by his actions. Someone who's around thirty-five years old, you don't see him wanting to go wading in a pond. You don't see him wanting to take off his shoes and roll up his pants legs and go skipping down the street. We did that several times. He was in a crazy mood sometimes, and we'd do crazy things."

And Corll cried. Guy said, "If I seemed like I was angry with him, or it seemed like I was frustrated or something, he always thought that he was to blame for it, and several times he even broke down in tears because he thought I was angry with him." Guy was unable to reconcile the picture of Dean Corll the mass murderer with his own memories of Dean Corll the gentle lover. "There was no sadistic moves or threats or anything of the sort. He was an extremely gentle person."

One spring evening in the park, the two new friends discussed music, and it developed that the favorite song of each was The Stylistics' version of "Betcha By Golly Wow." They exchanged mint copies of the record and recited the lyrics interminably.

Toward the middle of summer, Corll began talking about fleeing Houston. "He was determined that I was going to leave with him," Guy told Dave Lamble, "and we were gonna go someplace that he was unknown, that I was unknown, someplace like in Mexico, farther down, even Central America, away from this entire life here. Several times he got to the point where he was determined that he wanted another lifestyle or a change from this life. He felt that he would just die here, but that he could become another person with me."

Guy vetoed the grandiloquent plan, and "Dean was hurt, but he wasn't angry with me. He said he still wanted to be with me." And whenever Guy would suggest that all affairs must come to an end, Corll would cry.

A sometime girl friend turned up. Betty Hawkins was in her late twenties, divorced, the mother of two small sons, one of them studying Braille because of

incipient blindness. Mrs. Hawkins herself had been born with one sightless eye; she was a short, likable woman with a lovely soprano voice and an outgoing personality. She had known Dean Corll for a dozen years, and dated him sporadically for five.

“I was in the process of getting a divorce when Dean and I first went out,” she recalled, “and I was worried about being seen alone with a man. We went to the show, but we took my two sisters, my niece, my two sons, my brother and his friend, and Dean paid for every one of us. A few months later, when my divorce was final, we began dating. Dean was one of the kindest men I ever knew. If he had something and someone needed it, he’d give it to them. So far as I know, he didn’t have any special hobby, unless it was helping other people. If I said I needed something, he would get it for me. That guy must’ve went through fifteen TV’s the last five years; every time I turned around, his TV would be gone. Somebody would come up and say ‘I’d like to have it,’ and he gave it to ‘em for hardly nothing.”

Unlike “Guy,” Betty Hawkins never saw Corll in tears; he was far more likely to be sardonically humorous. “He was a good one on jokes,” she said. “Just clever remarks that he made up himself. His whole family’s like that: his brother and his sister and his mother, Mary West. You can say *anything* to them, and they can make a joke out of it. Like at the funeral, we didn’t like all the picture taking, but Mrs. West said, ‘Oh, well, let ’em go ahead. I always wanted to be on TV!’”

The young divorcée was pleased by another of Corll’s characteristics. “He made me feel like I was somebody,” she said, “and the biggest majority of men seemed to want to make me feel so much lower than them, and all they wanted was to take me to bed. They’d think, Oh, she’s been married, she’s got to have some, she’s an easy make. In five years, Dean and I never really had sex. Sometimes we would hug and kiss. There were times that we came close, but we never did it. Once we started, but he stopped. I felt like he had enough respect for me to not. He believed you should be married. There aren’t very many like that. We both felt the same about it.”

After the first year of dating, “he’d say things like, ‘You know I been thinking lately I oughta settle down and get married.’ But he never really asked me. One time we talked about it, and 1 thought he was gonna ask me, but all of a sudden he changed his mind, and he wouldn’t give me any reason. And later on he’d say he couldn’t afford to get married. And I’d say, ‘Well, I can work, you know. Even if I worked part time to take care of my own kids, that would save on the nursery.’ But he’d say, ‘No. *Uh uh!* If we got married, you wouldn’t work,

definitely not!’”

At times during the five years, the courtship waned, and for a whole year the young mother dated another man and hardly saw Corll. “Dean just ignored it,” she said. “He’d always say, ‘Well, I want you to be sure I’m the one you want.’”

Betty Hawkins knew about Corll’s friendship with Wayne Henley and David Brooks and certain other young men and boys, “but I figured Dean liked them and he was helping them. I know David lived off Dean. Around 1970 David came here from Beaumont, and Dean drove him back to get his clothes. David was fourteen or fifteen then. Dean always liked kids, and he always wanted to help people; that’s why I didn’t think anything of David living with him. David had run away any number of times from Beaumont to come back to Houston. Lately Dean began saying that he wanted to get away from those boys, Brooks and Henley. I’d say, ‘How come you move so much?’ and he’d say ‘Well, I was just trying to get away from those boys.’”

When David Brooks and his girl friend were married in 1973, Corll told Betty, “They want to use our family’s place up at Lake Sam Rayburn for their honeymoon. I don’t know why they want to have a honeymoon. They’ve already done all they can do.” Betty Hawkins said that was a perfect example of how funny Dean could be.

Mrs. Mary West, Dean Corll’s mother, had flown to her son’s funeral in Houston from her home in Colorado, and then quietly returned. Both sides of the fractured family had adopted a posture of silence about the case, but Mary West was a vivacious, bombastic woman, as sensitive to deprecation as her son, and soon she dispatched an open letter to Wayne Henley and David Brooks:

My heart is heavy with sorrow; not only for the loss of my son, but also for the loss of all the boys and people whose lives they touched.

To David and Wayne, you may have the best defense lawyer the world can offer but your best defense is God. You can lie, plan, and plant evidence to shift the blame to one who cannot defend himself, but you surely know that your days on this Earth are numbered, whether it is behind bars or walking the streets. We are not concerned with your bodies, but we are concerned with your souls. “And the truth will set you free.”

If you knew where to find the bodies of these children, you also have a list of names. Please set the anxious parents’ hearts at ease, and see how much better you feel.

I am not trying to solve this mystery, as I know nothing about the case. I only know that Dean loved both of you. He did things for you that you could not do

for yourself but you cut off the hand that fed you. Dean cannot help you now. He loaned you his truck to go on dates. He borrowed money from the bank to buy you a Vet.

Would he have rented the boat shack to bury bodies in and still loan it to friends or the family to store furniture in and help them move in? Would he ever stoop so low as to have had these wild parties in a house belonging to his father whom he adored? He was not a sex maniac nor a sadist. You might be able to convince the type people who drag their children out to see bodies dug up out of the Earth that this is true, but the people who know Dean, worked with him, will never believe these terrible accusations.

I called him on the telephone Sunday night. I tried calling all day and when I finally got him, he said he was dodging someone. He did not say who, and I thought perhaps it was someone he might have owed money to. I do not worry, because Dean has never given me cause to worry….

The gas mask on the bed proves to me and the world that Dean was not going to shoot you. He only wanted to live and let live. The torture boards were also planted, and where are his clothes and the books I sent him on *Help for Today* and *This Thing Called You* by Ernest Holmes?

Parents, pray for your children, and children, write your parents. What a wonderful world this could be if we all turned to God for guidance. The police department could solve all their problems if they too really and truly asked God for help. God does not protect us from the law. He is the Law. The law of love, life, happiness, prosperity and success.

I cannot help but wonder if the digging would have stopped if the record had not been broken.

If the schools and society got off the sex kick and the school teachers only concentrated on the Three Rs and parents and society taught their children that when they are old enough to leave their earthly father, they should depend on their Heavenly Father for guidance, this world, in my opinion, would be a better place to live.

Now that the digging has stopped, let’s keep searching for souls, with prayer, letters to the press. I’m sure the press will cooperate, because they too could use a bit of God’s help.

Father God—You are my life. You are all life. You make the darkness turn to light and turn swords into plowshares. You can lead nations out of trouble and have Your all seeing eye on the sparrow. There is no big and no little in Your vast spiritual system. When You are for us, who can be against us? I pray for the

law officers and the attorneys that they do some soul searching and ask for Your divine guidance. I know that Dean's life was not shed in vain and know that our children who have left this Earth's plane have returned to You and are surrounded by Your loving care. Grant the parents of all missing children the strength to wipe the bitterness from their hearts and know that you will not forsake us.

Thank you Father. And so it is.

Dean Corll's Mother

Mary West

Reporters called on Mrs. West in her little second-floor apartment atop a gift shop in Manitou Springs, Colorado, “Gateway to Pikes Peak.” They found a petite, alert woman with wide-set blue eyes lined in green under neatly penciled brows. Her hair was chestnut, trimmed to a medium length, and her lips wore the permanent downturn of a difficult life. Mrs. West was not reluctant to place the original blame. “I came from a dirt farm in Indiana,” she said. “I drove tractors and horses. I run out and got the cows when they got out, went to the outhouse at night, stepped on the boards and everything. It wasn’t the easiest life.” Fifty-seven years after her birth, she remained convinced that she was unwanted. ‘T was the only one in the family ever got a divorce, and that went against me, and I was the second daughter of a farmer, which made it bad from the beginning. See, farmers want a boy to start with, and my parents got a girl. When a farm family gets the second girl, that’s bad. I was the second girl. Then Mom and Dad got a boy and another girl, and I was left out in the middle. They never really did count me in.”

Mrs. West sipped Scotch and soda and talked bitterly about her American Gothic background, and it was easy to visualize Dean Corll’s mother as the prostrate woman in Andrew Wyeth’s evocative painting *Christina’s World*. Tears came to her eyes, and she paused and composed herself. “My dad died in the wintertime, and I went up for the funeral and I had to borrow a hat from Mom, ’cause I never wear a hat, and the next day I overheard Mom say, ‘Oh, Mary looked so *funny* going around here with a hat on!’ I had my feelings hurt. And even now my mother says things like ‘I don’t think Dean was doin’ right.’ But she doesn’t *know!* I remember a time when I was trying to get away from one of my husbands, and I went on a train trip with a girl-friend, but she was drunk all the time and flopped all over me and tried to make a nigger porter, so I went on to Indiana to visit my folks, but I had a scene with my mother. I finally said, ‘Mom, you’ve never done *anything* I wanted you to do!’ and just flat shot my mouth off. They told me not to talk to my mother like that, and the doctor had to get me some nerve medicine. They *never* talk nice to me in Indiana. I always had my feelings hurt when I got up there anyhow.” She dabbed at her eyes again.

Mary West was married and divorced five times—twice to Arnold Corll, twice to a merchant seaman, and once to the traveling salesman whose name she retained. “But there was never any violence in my marriages,” she was quick to point out. “It was always just a confliction of ideas.” She belonged to the Church of Religious Science and believed that evil per se exists only in the mind. “We teach that man will eventually go back to his Maker through different stages,”

she explained. “Always upward. In your next life, you’ll see everything clearly.”

Shortly after the news of the murders broke, she telephoned a clairvoyant in Dallas who told her that Dean had been used by others. A card reader in nearby Colorado Springs examined the date and hour of her son’s birth and declared, “He couldn’t possibly have done it. He couldn’t even have been a homosexual.” Another seer told Mrs. West that Dean’s only involvement in the case was that “he knew something he didn’t tell soon enough.”

Her intuitions confirmed, the resolute woman began a fight to clear her son’s name, starting with the open letter to Henley and Brooks. “It burns me up that the newspapers are publishing stories about twenty-seven dead boys, and they don’t say twentyeight,” she exclaimed. “Dean was killed, too, but they don’t count him! It’s not a twenty-seven-boy deal, it’s a twenty-*eight*-boy deal! I’m gonna slap a suit on the papers some day. I can’t wait till the front page in Houston says ‘Mary West sues TV stations and papers for one hundred thousand dollars apiece.’

“I wouldn’t mind if I thought that Dean did it. If he was the type that *could* do it, I wouldn’t mind at all. I’d say, ‘Well, my son did something big.’ But when I *know* he didn’t do it, that bothers me. So I’m suing the papers for saying he’s the killer. Let this case be an example.”

One evening a Houston reporter telephoned Mrs. West and questioned her about a remark made by her seafaring ex-husband: “That queer SOB of a son of hers broke up our marriage.”

Mrs. West exploded over the long-distance wires. “What the hell is the difference?” she snapped. “You’re not trying the gay people, you’re trying a murder case down there!” She told another newsman that she was convinced that Dean was not a homosexual; “he was disinterested in sex in any way, shape or form. He might have had his moments; he might have been with a boy, I don’t know. But that doesn’t make him a homosexual. It definitely wasn’t a passion with him.” Later she added, “I wouldn’t consider Dean a homosexual *or* a heterosexual. I know nothing about his sex life. I don’t think it was important to him. Dean knew how much trouble you could get in if you used sex just as an entertainment.”

And if her son was neither a homosexual nor a heterosexual, he was much less a murderer in the embattled woman’s eyes. “All 1 want to do now is prove him innocent,” she said. “I don’t even care if they get me. It doesn’t mean that much. I’m not afraid to die. If people knew the whole story of Dean’s life, they would be *absolutely sure* that Dean—is—no—killer! And if people heard the whole

story, they'd know I didn't let him down."

THE RECONSTRUCTED LIFE HISTORY of a murdered murderer must proceed from certain assumptions. The party of the first part is unable to explain, to defend, or even to send up regrets from the grave. He cannot beat his breast and cry a becoming *"Mea culpa."* His killer must speak of him in the most odious terms, and so must those who loved his victims. His own closest admirers must dissociate themselves from his memory, or embrace convoluted theories to deny the unassimilable truth. Everyone with the slightest involvement stakes out a position and busily defends it, like a badger backed down a hole. Grays can be turned to blacks or whites, and the truth made to suffer.

Dean Corll's father, the lean electrician who surfaced briefly at his son's funeral and was described in admiring terms by his former neighbors, took the dignified option of refusing either to discuss the case or to permit members of his immediate family to discuss it. The available information came from others, notably Arnold Corll's ex-wife, Mary West, herself fully committed to her dead son's innocence. Others added shadings and tones, and a pattern emerged, ragged and imprecise, but as clear and precise as anyone was ever likely to know.

Dean Arnold Corll was born on Christmas Eve, 1939, in Waynedale, Indiana, a suburb of the smoky industrial town of Fort Wayne. Both parents were twenty-four years old; the father worked in a factory. The marriage was stormy, and after the birth of a second son, the couple discussed divorce. "In those days, Mr. Corll didn't relate with little kids," Mary West recalled from her own point of view. "This was one of the reasons we split. The boys did things that I thought were real cute and funny, but he'd think it was something to be punished about. One day Dean stepped in the toilet, and then he got in the sink and turned the water on. I thought that was a real accomplishment, but when I told Mr. Corll about it, he said, 'Well, he ought to be whipped for that!' Of course, Mr. Corll never whipped the boys, and neither did I. Sometimes he'd make 'em sit in a chair for punishment. But Dean didn't require punishment! I'd say, 'Arnold, it's all right to make 'em sit in a chair, but tell 'em to get up in a little while.' 'Cause they'd get restless, they'd try to get up, and he'd make 'em sit back down. He was real strict. When they wanted to go out and play, the kids would ask me, 'cause they knew their father'd say no. Then he'd get mad at me 'cause I didn't check with him. Oh, we just couldn't make it!"

After the divorce, Arnold Corll was drafted and shipped to an Army Air Force station at Memphis, Tennessee, and soon his exwife and two sons drove up to the base towing a house trailer. The reconciliation was short-lived, and the

young divorcée put her two sons in a day nursery and took a job. Later an elderly farm couple let her park the trailer under a tree; they took care of the boys while she was earning a living. “Dean began his schooling,” Mary West reminisced, “and Stanley played on the farm. He’d follow that old farmer with his one-horse plow all day long. One day the old man plowed his shoes under.” The memory brought a rare smile to her face. “They were happy times for the boys. They enjoyed themselves on the farm.”

The older son was barely six years old when his mother began to detect a difference between him and the other children, including his own brother Stanley. “Dean never cared if anybody played with him or not,” she said. “From the time he was little, he never went anyplace to see anybody else. If the kids would come to our place, he’d be nice to ’em and he’d play with ’em, but he would never go to their house seeking them out. It might’ve had something to do with a birthday party he went to when he was six, and he had his feelings hurt ’cause he was so little and he didn’t get a prize. I thought that bothered him, so whenever birthday parties would come up, I wouldn’t make him go. You would never hear him say, ‘Could I go to so-and-so’s to play?’ Stanley was always out runnin’ with the other kids, but Dean would stay home.”

After the war, the Corlls were remarried and towed the little trailer all the way to the boom town of Houston to begin a new life together, but the second marriage collapsed quickly. “Mr. Corll was a good, moral man,” his ex-wife insisted, “but we just had a personality clash. In the years since then, he’s never given me the slightest cause to be annoyed with him. He always took an interest in his sons, and he paid his support money. Sometimes people just don’t click. That don’t mean they’re not decent people.”

The next few years were harrowing for the woman and her two young boys. Dean and Stanley were shunted to nursery schools and baby-sitters while their mother eked out a living. Somewhere around the age of six or seven, Dean suffered an undiagnosed case of rheumatic fever; doctors made an ex post facto diagnosis when they found a heart murmur later. He was kept out of school and ordered to avoid all exercise. “Dean accepted it,” his mother said proudly. “He accepted everything. He never fussed at *anything.”* But he also developed a tendency to worry, especially about others. “He was sort of a serious type,” Mrs. West explained. “If his little brother didn’t come in for a while, Dean’d call me at work and he’d say, ‘Mother, Stanley hasn’t been in for two or three hours!’ He was always worried about the others. He grew up taking care of *everybody,* worrying if they were gonna come out all right. When I’d be driving him someplace in the snow, he’d stand on the front seat and he’d say, ‘Mommy,

you’re going too fast!’ He even worried about me!”

With no husband on the premises, the young mother was equally protective of her sons. One summer Stanley and Dean, seven and nine, witnessed a minor misdemeanor: neighborhood boys shot out a street-corner light. Sheriff’s deputies used the two Corll children as informers, and then pinned little tin badges on them. When their mother came home from work that night, the boys were babbling with pride, but Mary Corll was upset at the news. “I called up the sheriff and I told him I didn’t appreciate him having to have help from little kids,” she recalled, still angry almost twenty-five years afterward. “I figured the other kids would be layin’ for Stanley and Dean, and there’d be fights all summer, and I asked the sheriff to send protection. When he wouldn’t do it, I just said, ‘Well, my children are *not* gonna stay in this neighborhood!’ I sent ‘em to my mother’s farm in Indiana for the summer.”

In the young woman’s view, the season on the farm eliminated any later necessity for sex education for the two boys. “When they came back, I didn’t see that there was much that I had to tell them. What kind of sex training do you have to give a boy that’s lived on a farm? You don’t have to tell him nothin’! And Dean never asked. He was unconcerned about sex. The boys ran around the house and they didn’t care whether they had clothes on or not.”

By the time Dean reached adolescence, his mother had married a salesman, J. J. “Jake” West, a burly man who traveled Louisiana, Mississippi and East Texas for Westclox. The family moved to Vidor, Texas, a few miles east of Beaumont and a short haul from the Louisiana border. Dean Corll spent his high school years in Vidor, birthplace of the imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and frequent site of Klan rallies.

An early friend of the West family described the community: “Vidor is considered, and always has been, a backward community. We pay damned little taxes, we have darn little. A railroad town, a rough class of people here after the war…. There are no colored people in this town. None. There have never *been.*[*] This town has some ideas that date back prior to the time I was born, and it’s still that way. People came to Vidor because it’s a nice quiet place to get away.”

Sally Bixby Defty, star reporter for the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, studied Vidor first hand and put the matter even more candidly: “There are some nice people, but essentially it’s the kind of place where the big event for the kids is to pour kerosene on the cat and set it afire. It’s the kind of place where nobody cares about civil rights and everybody cares about the high school football team.”

Dean enrolled as a freshman in Vidor High School. “He wasn’t no grade-A student,” his mother remembered. “He was satisfactory. He stayed in school because he was really interested in the band. He didn’t fail, but he was no Truman Capote, no genius at the age of twelve. I never wanted a genius and thank God I never had one.”

The boys swam naked at the Blue Hole, an old clay quarry, and went down to the Trinity River to pick pecans. Dean took up skin diving, but he had to quit when he almost fainted in church one morning. “We took him to the doctor and he said it was pressure on his neck,” Mrs. West said. “Had something to do with that heart murmur a few years before. So he had to quit skin diving and cut off strenuous activity again. He didn’t care. He was all tied up in the band by that time, playing his trombone.” Young Dean liked to trap flying squirrels and chain them around his neck, or take them to school in his cowboy boots.

One day a pecan salesman dropped in at the Wests’ big home on Dogwood Drive and noticed the lady of the house baking several pies at once. “If you got that much energy,” the man said, “why don’t you start making candy?” The energetic Mrs. West liked the idea, and soon afterward the entire family drove to a candy plant in Houston and paid fifty dollars for a praline recipe.

From the first day of candymaking, Dean Corll became the embodiment of the whole operation. “I remember the machines coming in,” a high school friend said, “and putting ’em in the garage, for separating and cracking different-size pecans, shaking ’em, cleaning ’em, all by machine, and Dean kept those machines running, wrapped the candy in boxes and delivered ’em. That’s one reason he didn’t have a whole lot of social life. He was busy *all* the time.”

After a while, the family systematized the process. Mrs. West would make the candy, Dean and Stanley would wrap and box it, and Jake West would take it on his sales route and sell it. When special problems came up or extra impetus was needed, the teenage Dean was always ready. “He ran back and forth delivering in Vidor,” Mrs. West recalled. “He did every single thing we asked him to, without ever makin’ a complaint. Sometimes when they both had to wrap, Stanley’d get the jitters and want to go to a ball game or something, and Dean’d say, ‘Well, if you give me all the boxes you’ve wrapped, I’ll let you go.’ And Dean ended up getting the money. This is the way they got along. If Stanley had something Dean wanted, he’d just wait till Stanley needed money and he’d buy it from him.”

The loci of the young man’s life were the high school band room and the candy factory. Said his school friend: “I don’t recall him ever dating a girl or I don’t

think he even went to the proms or anything that I can remember. I don't remember seeing him there. Both of us had few friends."

An old snapshot showed Corll seated with the band, holding his trombone. "We had a sincere desire to be the best damned band in this whole area, seventy-five or eighty kids," his friend said. "Dean was no different. The football team wasn't anything to brag about, but the band was the greatest." When the band went out of town, Dean would provide big boxes of candy for nibbling on the bus. He failed senior English and was ineligible to graduate, but the 1958 yearbook, *The Pirates' Treasure,* pictured him along with the graduates. "Sweet to know," the yearbook called him. "Very occupied."

The Wests moved to the northern outskirts of Houston to be closer to the growing market for "Pecan Prince" candies, the family's new trademark, and Dean made up his high school failure by correspondence. He also began to clash with Jake West, who by now had quit Westclox altogether and was devoting himself exclusively to the family's thriving business in pralines, pecan chewies, and divinity. Mrs. West described a typical scene disdainfully: "Jake'd order Dean to do things, and one day he said, 'Dean, take the car and go into town and get some milk.' Dean came back with the wrong kind, and Mr. West said, 'Well, he never does *anything* right!' Dean told me later, 'I'm not gonna go in and get him anything else! I'm not gettin' paid for it anyway.'"

A few days later, Jake West had another errand for his stepson, and he told his wife to pass the order along. "*You* tell him!" Mrs. West said. "You're the one that fussed at him the other day." West ran the errand himself.

"He knew he was wrong," Mrs. West said, "but he just wouldn't bow down and say, 'Well, Dean, I'm sorry.' I was the peacemaker between the kids and Mr. West the whole time. The kids'd bring me their problems with Mr. West, and I would try to explain his point of view to them, but finally it got to the place where I would say, 'Look, we're not doing things for *him,* we're doing things for *ourselves.* If we want things done, we'll do 'em 'cause *we* want 'em done.' That worked fine, and we got along as good as any split family could."

When Dean was nineteen years old and still working as an unsalaried candymaker and wrapper and handyman, the family moved to The Heights and set up a new shop, and the boy was packed off to Indiana to live on the farm where his mother had been brought up. "I thought it was time he got away from home," Mary West explained. "My dad had just died, and Mom needed somebody for the adjustment. And I felt like Dean had it coming, to get away. He'd been working for nothing for us."

The rural sabbatical stretched into two years, and Mrs. West's recollections are in a minor key. "Dean worked in a coil factory up there, and he had a Simca, two or three cylinders, like a li'l cartoon thing. Nowadays when I ask Mom about it, she remembers things that aggravated her. Like Dean wouldn't cut off the limb of a tree the minute she'd ask him. She'd get mad and cut the limb off and he'd take her picture, just to tease her, or take her picture when she was climbing over a fence or somethin' like that. Well, my mother is not the type to brag about any of her children. When Mom has anything to say, it's usually critical—something they did that they shouldn't have done. Like she'd tell Dean to pick up the cobs in the barnyard and he didn't do it. Little things. He wrote and told me not to tell my folks in Indiana what I was up to in Houston because they'd say something about it. 'That's another scatterbrain idea that's gonna fail.' This is the attitude my family has had about me. *Always.* Things are gonna be bad, I'm gonna fail. But Dean was loyal to me, and he said, 'Mother, write to 'em but don't tell 'em what you're doing, 'cause they're gonna make something out of it.' It really hurt him to think that they would do that to me.

"What did he do for fun? Well, he kept his moon charts and star charts up in the barn. He was interested in astronomy for a while, but he never really did stick with anything for long. He liked fads. He was a gadget man. He had a great big tape recorder that we made payments on. He had a six-hundred-power telescope in Indiana, and he liked to watch the neighbors with it. One day he invited Mom to take a peek, and she looked in and saw them feeding their stock. Dean said, 'What do you think of that?' and Mom said, 'Be quiet! They'll hear us!'

"He got a movie camera and made movies with all the kids that lived around the farm. There were two sisters about a half a mile down the way that played with him all the time, and they'd take a movie of one of 'em laying on a table, pretending they were making a doctor movie. They put a sheet over her, and then they got chicken livers and stuff like that, and they'd take kitchen tongs and pretend to be pulling these organs out of her, while Dean handled the camera. Wanda was the nurse and her sister was the patient. It was supposed to be a comedy film. I know my mother thought it was funny."

At Mary West's request, the twenty-year-old man returned to his family in Houston in 1960. "I called for him because I needed him," the mother explained. "Our candy business was growing and we needed his help. We started paying him this time."

For several months, tape-recorded letters and candy and cakes flew back and forth in the mails between Dean Corll and the Indiana girl named Wanda. One day the telephone rang in the candy factory and Wanda was on the line. Mrs.

West recreated the leap-year conversation:

“Dean, are you sitting down?”

“No.”

“Well, go ahead and sit down.”

“Okay, I’m sitting down now.”

“Dean, I’m getting married!”

“Who to?”

“You!”

That ended the romance. “He never even called her back!” Mrs. West said emphatically. “He didn’t want to become emotionally involved with any person or any thing. *Never!”* The young man had seen his mother’s two marriages to Arnold Corll fall apart, and now the marriage to Jake West was crumbling. “Dean knew how hard it was to be married,” Mrs. West said. “He didn’t want it for himself. You can’t blame him. A kid only knows what he sees.”

One day West lost his temper and ordered his wife to go home and stay home; “I don’t ever want to see you in this candy shop again!”

Mary West was not one to suffer despotism gladly. “I said, ‘Okay,’” the redoubtable woman recalled, “and I started a candy company of my own in a garage behind our house. It may seem odd, two candy companies in the same family, but that’s the way it was. It was time to get something started for my children. The idea was maybe we could be successful and we’d wind up with a different shop for every one of us. Well, Mr. West couldn’t stand that I was doing this for my children and not for him. Made him jealous. Well, he’s the one threw me out of the shop. He thought it was on its feet, so he could get all the credit.”

From the beginning, young Dean became absorbed in the new plant, and Mrs. West worked twelve-hour days developing recipes and getting the business off the ground. She named herself president, Dean vice-president, and Stanley, serving a hitch in the marines, secretary-treasurer *in absentia*. “I incorporated right away so Mr. West and I wouldn’t be responsible for each other’s debts, even though we were still living in the same house,” the mother said. “I had a feeling like he’d go broke. He was a very poor businessman. So I was protecting him at the same time I was protecting myself. He said it was okay, but deep down it wasn’t, especially when we started making money at the Corll Candy Company. He spread the word that somebody had stolen his recipes and somebody was packaging candies just like his. We were still married, and he

was trying to break me! He'd give away free candy, things like that, but that only put him deeper in the red. One night Dean and I went over to Pecan Prince and found all these nasty letters that Mr. West was sending out about us. Dean dictated them into his tape recorder. Then we found out that he was following my candy broker around, and all this while we're still married! Dean stayed loyal to me. Dean was *always* loyal to me."

The savage intrafamily competition brought down the marriage in 1963. "This was about the time the Pressure Cooker Club came up in Houston," Mrs. West said, smiling at the memory. "The newspapers found out that all these frustrated wives were going to a joint out on Telephone Road when their husbands were working, and they'd put their dinner in the pressure cooker when they got home, and the men wouldn't know what was going on. When Mr. West and I got the divorce, I said, 'Shoot! If I'd have known it was gonna turn out like this, I might as well have gone into the Pressure Cooker Club!' But I didn't. I just worked. That's all I've ever done."

Dean moved into his first apartment, above the garage that had been converted into the Corll Candy Company. In his mother's view, the young man's life was idyllic. "He had every gadget there was in that place," she said. "He had a tape recorder. He had Spanish sieep-learnin' tapes that he listened to under his pillow. He bought a Honda and carried the kids on it, and later on he had a Dodge van with a television. He didn't drink or run around, and if he needed something like a truck or a car, we bought it for him. He had absolutely no sales resistance. If he wanted something, he wanted it *right now*. Household Finance helped him. Like he'd buy a Honda and then winter'd come and he'd say, 'I don't need a Honda anymore,' and he'd sell it for what's due, pay off Household Finance, and the next thing he'd buy a bigger one, and do the same thing over. I used to tell him that he needed more sales resistance. He'd kid me. He'd say, 'Mother, I sure used my sales resistance tonight. I went shopping when the stores were closed!'"

She summoned up a single sour note from those earliest days of the Corll Candy Company. "We had this boy helping out, and I noticed Dean didn't speak to him for two, three days. I asked one of the girls what happened, the fat girl, and she said the boy told Dean what he could do for Dean, or what they could do for each other, or somethin'. So I just paid the boy off. Dean was really upset with him, and he didn't mind when I let him go."

Then the family's cottage industry suffered a heavy setback; the vice-president and chief candyman was drafted. Corll had first been ordered for a physical in 1962, but his mother had waged a two-year delaying action on the grounds that he was indispensable. But on August 10, 1964, at the age of twenty-four, the

young man was assigned to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for basic training. Later he went to Army radio repair school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then to permanent assignment as a radio repairman at Fort Hood, Texas. Ten months after his induction, he was honorably discharged. “Dean wasn’t a fighter anyhow,” his mother said. “He hated the service. And I needed him real bad. I’m the one got him out. I went through the Red Cross and the governor to do it. Dean was always happy to do anything I asked him. Wherever I wanted him, that’s where he’d be.”

Years later, a close friend theorized that the Army damaged Dean Corll: “He told me that’s where it started, when, you know, the first time he ever—turned to a fag, really, I guess that’s the only way I can say it. And ever since then I guess it just got worse and worse and worse.”

With the return of its star executive, the Corll Candy Company moved into a large prefabricated shed across Twenty-second Street from the Helms Elementary School, and the competition with Jake West’s nearby Pecan Prince company intensified. West had a new label put on his candies: “*The original Texas pecan chewie, created by J. J. West.*” His ex-wife countered by using the same typeface and colors and the inscription: “*Corll candy, new, improved, but with the woman’s touch.*” “Mr. West didn’t dare say a thing about it,” she said. “That was just our way of getting back at him.”

Every day, Jake would cruise along Twenty-second Street two or three times in his gray Lincoln Continental, checking the activity at the rival factory. “It was strictly business,” Mrs. West said. “He tried to break us, but we weren’t enemies. I didn’t hold it against him. He was jealous of the fact that we were gonna make it.”

An employee had a different interpretation: “Dean was there day and night; he lived right alongside, in a little house trailer. His mother hated Jake West, and she was deliberately trying to put him out of business, and so was Dean. Mary was always telling Dean how much she hated West, all this stuff. The atmosphere was *very* intense.”

Other employees had similar memories of the Corll Candy Company. Mrs. West seemed to turn more and more toward her outside life, while Dean took over the commercial operation. He had no objections. As his mother was proud of saying, “Dean did whatever I asked of him. And never a complaint.”

Mrs. West was described by another employee as “not really young in those years—she must’ve been nearly fifty—but she was a nice-looking lady, very attractive. She was lonely, she had a good figure, and she wanted to get married.

Who can blame her? She went out a lot, wore a lot of make-up, sweaters and slacks, fur coats, things like that. She drove around in a new station wagon. I got the impression that she was trying to hang on to her youth. She depended on palmists and readers. She'd have a favorite seer and she wouldn't do a thing unless it was planned out and read first. The seer would say, 'Mary, I see a certain time and a certain place, and if you go there you're gonna meet a man that's gonna be very influential,' and she'd go."

Workers remembered a striking aspect of the mother-son relationship. "They were both super-protective of each other," a parttime wrapper recalled. "Sometimes it was like she was the daughter and he was the father. Sometimes he'd even scold her, right in front of us. She'd be telling about one of her dates, and Dean'd get angry, and he'd say, 'Oh, Mother, *don't!'* and he'd shake his head like he was annoyed, you know? He was like a lot of boys with divorced parents—they take over as head of the house, and they feel that they're protecting their mothers."

An early friend of the family saw the mutual protectiveness as a problem for both. "They say Dean thought a lot of his father, but he *lived* with his mother," the man said. "When he was twentyeight he bought a motorcycle and his mother was always getting down on him about it. She was so afraid he was gonna hurt himself or somethin'…. She was really protective. Dean had to hide his new Honda in the candy shop so she wouldn't see it. He'd lock it in the little storeroom. It really bent my head that he was that afraid of her."

Another friend recalled: "Mrs. West was about like the mother of a fifteen-or a sixteen-year-old boy, and she—you know how Houston is—she was just afraid of what her boy could get into. Even though Dean was grown, she still treated him that way. The things he bought and everything else, she was always questioning him. 'Why'd you do this, why'd you do that?'"

To everyone in the busy plant, Corll was the indefatigable candymaker, a skilled professional with bottomless reserves of energy and enterprise. "He improvised on the recipe and almost put Pecan Prince out of business because our candy was so much better," one said. "Dean would always work on the recipes, pralines, pecan rolls, divinity, little chewies, and he was a genius at it. None of us ever knew the recipe; that's another reason Dean was so important to the business. He was a regular one-man band."

Sometimes working conditions were oppressive inside the metal building, with temperatures well above one hundred as the mixtures sputtered and spattered in giant copper pots. "We all got burns," said a helper. "I had second-and third-

degree burns on my fingers, still have scars. You'd try handling the candy without gloves, and that stuff just hardens as soon as it gets on your skin, and you have to peel it off, and the skin comes too. That happened to Dean lots of times, but he never seemed to mind it. He was so strong! He was always building himself up with weights and bar bells. We had these pots as big as a table, and we'd have to hook 'em to a hoist and push 'em along an overhead rail to the marble table where we poured. Sometimes Dean would get impatient, and he'd take two potholders and lift that whole pot, boiling hot! He wasn't but five foot eleven, maybe a hundred eighty-five, a hundred and ninety, but he was a powerful man. *Work?* I never saw anybody work like that man! He was trying to build up the business for himself and his mother. He could do everything there was to do in the place. People say he was nothing but a pervert and a homosexual. Well, to us he didn't have *any* swishy mannerisms. All he was was a very fine worker."

Mary West reflected on the same period and said aciduously, "Yeh, Dean worked hard, and what'd he get? *Nothin'!* He got a lot of bills, and he got shot."

With the candy factory as his laboratory, young Corll indulged his taste in electrical gewgaws. He installed secret microphones, and gleefully taped two employees conspiring to steal candy. He rigged up a telephone that recorded incoming messages, and he laughed and played tricks on the other workers. "Dean was a good sport," one of them recalled, "and we used to do things that'd drive a person off the wall. Like we'd telephone from the outside and leave fake messages on Dean's recorder, because when he was working on the candy he wouldn't answer the phone or allow anybody else to answer it, and after all the candy was poured, he'd sit down and take his messages and return the calls. So we'd phone in and say, 'Mr. Corll, I'd like to order a hundred gross of pralines, six dozen boxes of chewies, eighty pounds of divinity,' and we'd keep ordering till—'Beep!' The beeper'd go off and end the tape before he could get the name and address.

"He'd come running in and play it for us. 'Would y'all listen to *this?*' And we'd say, 'Oh, Dean, what a *shame!* And such a *big* order, too.' When he'd find out it was us, he'd say, 'Okay, I got y'all's message,' and we'd say, 'Oh, *no*, Dean, that wasn't us,' and we'd harse around."

For a time, the Corll Candy Company joined forces with a couple who produced candy apples, Ruby and Richard Jenkins, and the factory hummed from dawn till two in the morning. Mrs. Jenkins retained warm memories of Dean Corll. "We just had a high old time with him," she said. "One day we mixed all this syrupy gook together and it turned out the funniest turquoise color you ever saw, and I

had to stir it with paddles that looked like oars. So I said, ‘Hey, Dean, boil and bubble, toil and trouble, I’m gonna make poison apples for the kiddies!’ He laughed; he thought that was just so funny. Then out of the bottom of the pot came this huge bubble, and I poked it and it was *firm!* I said, ‘Ah ha, I bewitched it!’ And we all laughed again. And do you know not one of those turquoise apples sold?”

Mrs. Jenkins, a blithe, statuesque blonde, liked to pester young Corll with questions, and one day she insisted on learning the origin of the slab of marble on which the candy was poured. “Okay, if you insist,” Dean began. “You remember the old bus station downtown that they tore down? You remember those rest rooms?”

“Oh, yes,” Ruby Jenkins said. “That filthy dirty old place.”

“Well,” Dean said, “this marble was the walls of those rest rooms. I played hell getting the writing off it.”

For weeks afterward, Dean lifted fresh candy from the marble top with his spatula and offered it to the woman. “Piece of candy, Ruby?” he would say, smirking, and she would wriggle uncomfortably.

At Christmastime the production of pecan candies was interrupted while the little assembly line retooled for chocolate-covered cherries and other delicacies, few of which ever reached the outside world. “We’d shoot ‘em full of bourbon and give ‘em as Christmas presents to our brokers, our suppliers, people like that,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “And we got grapes and froze ‘em and rolled ‘em in salt and injected ‘em with vodka. Ah, they were good! We’d sit there and say, One for *them,* two for *us,’* and at the end of the day we’d all be high. Dean, too!”

Ruby and Richard Jenkins came to admire the young candymaker—“I mean we really *liked* him, both of us did,” the woman said—but they also detected a fundamental difference between Corll and other males. “There were girls around that factory that were wild about him,” Ruby Jenkins said, “but he wouldn’t give ‘em the time of day. His mother would try to line him up with dates, and he didn’t want any part of it. He’d get mad! I never saw him date a woman or show the slightest interest in a woman.”

Mary West discussed her son’s attractiveness to women in a tone of satisfaction. “One of our girls was in love with him,” she said, “and she came to me all excited on a Friday and said, ‘Dean wants me to go to the beach with him!’ On Monday she said, ‘I won’t go to the beach with *him* again! He came around to pick me up and he had his van full of kids!’ Well, that was Dean’s protection against being involved with anybody. He didn’t want to show too much affection

to women because he just wasn't ready to hurt their feelings or take up with 'em, so he kept the kids between 'em. The girls really loved him, and they loved to tease him, and he teased them back. He had a tear-gas gun, and he was playing with it by himself one day and it went off in the shop, and the next time we came to work one of the girls got to sneezing, her eyes watering, and she couldn't figure out what was the matter. So after I told 'em about the gun going off, they kidded Dean, said they were going home, they'd all come down with colds. They were always kiddin' around like that."

When the children in the school across the street learned the nature of the business in the big metal shed, they would line up at the door for samples, and Dean would accommodate them. "He was a regular Pied Piper," Ruby Jenkins said, laughing. "Everybody told him to stop, but he wouldn't stop. The principal even called and said, 'Please, don't encourage the kids! They're crossing the street to get the candy, and they're just little bitty kids. The parents are complaining.' But Dean'd *still* give it out. We'd have our candy-apple crew working and there'd be a knock on the door and the kids'd be waiting out there for candy. So we'd tell 'em, *'No!* You can't have any!' and they'd get mad and say, 'Well, we'll git it!' Sure enough, Dean would go around and hand it to them, or he'd carry it across the street to them. Dean loved kids! I never saw a man that loved kids like Dean. They were always around him, huggin' on him, and he just loved it.

"He got him a pool table and put it in the back, and there was a stream of teenage boys, fourteen-and fifteen-year-olds, in and out, in and out. The littler boys, he'd ride 'em on his Honda Ninety. He had a stereo that went full blast in his trailer next door, and you couldn't hear yourself think, and there'd be boys in the trailer all the time. He had a telephone that he rigged up for the kids to play with, shaped like a frog, and the eyes lit up when it rang, and you could talk on it without picking up the receiver. And he had a van, a '65 or '66 white van with a blue carpet and an old blue couch in it, and he had racks for surfboards. He loved the water and he loved the beach, and he was always taking boys down there with him."

After a while, some of the other workers began to notice that young Corll acted giddy around young men and boys. "He was flirty," one of them recalled. "If a guy'd walk by, maybe Dean'd reach out and pinch him. He always had boys around him, and it seemed odd. He didn't try anything fruity in front of us, but it began to be pretty obvious what he was. I don't know how his mother could *not* have known. Everybody around the candy factory knew it; we just kept quiet about it 'cause he was such a nice, decent person."

A teenage employee named Jimmy developed a marked defensive attitude toward the candymaker. “Jimmy didn’t act like he hated Dean,” said Ruby Jenkins, “but like he was afraid to be alone with him. Whenever Dean’s crew would leave, Jimmy was supposed to come in and clean up for our crew, but if Dean was still there and the two of them were alone, Jimmy wouldn’t do it. He’d ask my husband later, ‘Mr. Jenkins, can I wait to do my clean-up till everybody else is in? I’ll clean fast!’ When Richard asked him why he was afraid to be alone with Dean, he just dropped his head.”

But other boys remembered Corll fondly, without fear or reservation. “He just acted real nice to me,” a teenage Heights boy said. “He never tried to mess with me, nothin’. Back then he never even asked me to go anywhere with him. We just went over there, a lot of kids from the neighborhood. David and Malley and I went over there, and he’d give you free candy, and he was just real nice to you, just like a brother or sumpin’. He never tried anythang back then.”

“He had a lot of young friends,” Mary West said. “*They* latched on to *him. He* didn’t look for *them.* One would bring another one. He would let them use his tape player, teach ‘em how to use it, let ‘em come in any time they wanted, make ‘em feel at home.”

The night watchman said, “He was a very calm person, and he didn’t seem to be a radical on anything. He didn’t seem to be obnoxious. He just seemed to be just a regular good Joe.”

Those closest to the candyman suspected that he had a temper, but it was tightly controlled. “He had a room in the back that when he would get real mad he would go in there and pout, like a little kid,” said Ruby Jenkins. “He’d be working and something would go wrong and his ears would turn red and he’d head for his pouting room. As far as cursing, he would never use the big bad curse words. He would use ‘Goddamn’ and ‘son of a bitch,’ but not the big ugly words. He would say ‘shit’ a lot when he’d get angry, and I’d correct him —‘Excretion, Dean, *excretion!** He’d just laugh.”

In the last few years of the Corll Candy Company’s existence, from the mid-1960’s to the summer of 1968, the sturdy young man seemed to be spending a lot of time with his shovel. He dug between the rear wall of the factory and the railroad spur that ran along the right-of-way in the back. He dug in the earthen floor of his “pouting room,” boarded it over and then cemented it. He dug near White Oak Bayou, in an area that later became a blacktop parking lot. His exertions were usually carried out under cover of night, and his explanations were always the same: discarded candy apples drew bees, and spoiled pecans

were infested with weevils; the simplest way to avoid insect pests was to bury the contaminated matter. “He was real good about it,” said Ruby Jenkins. “He did his burying without a word of complaint, the way he did everything else. He had this big roll of clear plastic, four or five foot wide, and he had sacks and sacks of cement and some other stuff back in his pouting room. We didn’t ask what he used it for.”

While the candy company was working two shifts and showing a steady profit, Mary West visited a computer dating service on Bissonnet Street and spent four hours providing data. The upshot was a hurried marriage to Walt Colburn,* a merchant seaman. The newlyweds honeymooned in Mexico City, “and he scared the wits out of me,” Mary West said later. “He raised hell with a cabdriver and really showed himself up. I thought he was psycho; he almost got in a fight. Then he told me how the crews used to walk off ships whenever he signed on, and he bragged about it, *he bragged about it!* His previous wife hung herself in the garage, and he took the rope off her neck before he called the police, and they called it suicide. I went down to the coroner’s office to see the reports, and they said, ‘What do you think you are? Smarter’n the coroner?’ We went on a trip, to Indiana, and Walt had a fit and I said, ‘Either you get out or I’ll throw you out in a field!’ I went back later and picked him up and took him home to Texas.”

After an annulment, Mrs. West repeated her earlier pattern and remarried the same man, and the new household began to rock and rattle like the home in a movie cartoon. “It was all a big mistake,” she said ruefully. “He was so *jealous!* Once he flew from Boston to Houston because I didn’t answer the telephone. He rented a car and sat out in front of the house two nights in a row all night, waiting for some violence, and he didn’t find any. And the next day he dialed the wrong number and a man answered the phone, and he came busting in that house and here I was sitting in the middle of the floor, sewing. He’d steal something from the house, and then he’d blame it on Dean, and it got so Dean wouldn’t come over anymore. One year Stanley and his wife and their babies came for Christmas, but Dean wouldn’t come, and he said it was because every time he walked in our house something would happen. Dean said, ‘I don’t want to get involved with his house.’ I was just so *hurt!* To think that it was Dean’s birthday the day before, and I got him a sweater set. I was real proud of what I got him. I cried the whole Christmas.”

Colburn’s jealousy quickly led to open warfare, with his wife moving in and out of the house voluntarily and involuntarily, sneaking back to recover her personal possessions, and trying to disentangle herself from the relationship. “Once when

I was gone he sent me eight batches of flowers and told me I'd have the most beautiful funeral you ever saw if I died, *or else get home!* He talked about having me committed to an insane asylum. So *I* had *him* picked up for a mental examination, 'cause he'd told me he was a regular paranoid schizophrenic. They didn't keep him twenty-four hours! He called me up and he said, 'Look, I appreciate what you tried to do for me, but now you've got to have *your* mental examination. I'm not gonna put you in a county hospital, I'm gonna put you in a private one, and after you've had your shock treatments you can come home.' I hid in the candy shop for six weeks!"

In Mrs. West's recreation, Walt Colburn was doggedly chasing other women even while he was trying to frighten her into coming back to his home. "Every time I'd leave he'd run over to the computer and set up another date. One day I called the woman at the computer and told her what I thought was going on, and she said he'd already come in that morning and fixed up a date for that night. Well, Dean had a Dodge van then, with a walkie-talkie and everything, and we drove over to Walt's house and saw him heading out of the garage in his car, all dressed up. We followed him right to the house of his date. He pulled out his notebook and he looked and he run up and down the steps and he looked some more, but nobody answered the door. The next morning he called me up and he said, 'Aren't you gonna come home?'

"I said, 'You mean after you got stood up last night?'

"He said, 'How'd you know that?'

"I said, 'Well, I followed you! That's how I know it!'"

The candy business turned sour under the heavy personal stresses, and Dean was forced to take a trainee's job with Houston Lighting & Power Company to supplement the family's declining income. At night he would whip up five or six batches of candy to keep the place solvent. Sometimes he would cross the trail of his erstwhile stepfather on the way to work in the morning, "and then Dean'd call me and say, 'Mother, I run back into Walt today, and he had his girl friend with him,'" said Mrs. West. "But Dean never fussed at Walt; he was real calm about it. Walt'd say, 'Dean, why don't you make your mother come home to me?' Dean'd say, 'Well, Walt, you know my mother's not gonna put up with the way you're doing.' Just as calm? Dean thought Walt was nuts, and he wanted me to get away from him, but we didn't know how."

Gradually the Corll Candy Company became a fortress, to protect the petite woman from her husband. Dean installed a heavy lock and a buzzer system for opening it, and at night thick stone slabs were wedged into position to keep

anyone from shooting through the door. “We had to do it ‘cause Walt was always trying to break in,” Mrs. West said. “The police were no help at all. I called ‘em and they gave me some lip. So I said, ‘Well, if I can’t get any protection from the police, I’ll get me a gun,’ and I went to a gunshop and bought a twenty-two pistol.”

When Colburn discovered that he was firmly shut out of his wife’s life, he began leaving messages on the telephone recorder system. Dean became upset at the misuse of his equipment and told a co-worker, “Some day I’m gonna kill that guy!” After Colburn parked his car outside the front door one midnight, Corll said, “I ought to go out there and shoot holes in the back of his car, or take a couple of shots at him.”

Early one morning, around 2 or 3 A.M., the angry seafarer knocked on the front door of the factory and demanded his wife. “The night crew had already gone home,” said Ruby Jenkins, “and we were hanging around finishing up orders, me and Mary and Dean and my husband Richard. Mary had gone over to Walt’s house earlier to get some of her things, and he was screaming that she’d stolen something from him and he was gonna beat hell out of her. Then he began hollering that Dean was a queer, and Mary got furious. She hollered back, and then she said, ‘Get the gun, Dean, and just kill him!’ She wasn’t afraid. She kept telling Dean, ‘Get the gun! *Get the gun! Kill him! Kill him!’* Walt finally went away, but he kept coming back for three or four days, and Mary told Dean, ‘Do something! We’re gonna have to get rid of him!’”

Mary West painfully acknowledged the trying period in her life. “When Walt was giving me all this trouble and I had him under a peace bond, he’d drive around the shop blowing his horn, and he came up to pound on the door one day and tried to get in, and I made him get out, and I told Dean, I’m gonna shoot that man!’ Dean said, ‘Mother, if you don’t have any more control than that, I’m gonna take the gun away from you.’ And he gave me bricks to throw at Walt—a bunch of bricks that I kept by the front door. So how could people say now that Dean’s a murderer? Why, if Dean was ever gonna be a problem to anybody, it woulda been to Walt.”

All this time, the frightened woman was seeking the guidance of psychics, and one of them recommended that she leave Houston for good. Mrs. West was reluctant, but the clairvoyant convinced her that there was no choice. She went to Dallas, two hundred and fifty miles north, and on the advice of another seer won her fifth divorce. It was June, 1968, and three days later Dean helped pack her worldly possessions into a Chevrolet, and Mary West drove out of Texas “to get as far from Walt Colburn as I could.” Her son closed the doors of the

company and buried the last remnants of spoiled candy. He was twentyeight, and completely on his own for the first time in his life.

Like a man starting life anew, Dean Corll moved to a shed on Sixteenth Street, across the street from the Cooley Elementary School, installed black lighting and television and stereo and a foolproof alarm system, and began playing pranks like locking teenage boys into handcuffs. One may guess that he had already passed into homicidal mania, but there is no hard evidence. David Brooks had entered the scene, but only as a towheaded sixthgrader studying depravity at five or ten dollars a lesson. Apart from the usual stream of schoolboys, including Johnny Delome and Billy and Tony Baulch, Corll seemed to develop only a few friends, most of them six or eight years his junior. They found him companionable, and even after his death, they retained warm memories.

“I knew Dean was gay,” said one, “but he never bothered me. We lived together for a while in a one-bedroom furnished apartment, and he had his bed and I had mine. I’ve always known Dean was kind of weird, and had crazy ideas and did crazy things, but he was always a good dude. He always helped me every time I needed it, and he never expected nothin’ for it.”

Said another, “Dean was straight. Straight haircut, straight lifestyle. He never got into drugs. He smoked a little weed, and that’s about it. If he wanted to get high, he’d drink, and that’s as far as he went. And he didn’t drink much, ‘cause he’d go stoned asleep.”

Like the Dean of the candymaking days, he remained a joker, but his tolerance of the banter of others seemed to diminish. “He never liked to talk about himself,” a friend said, “but he told me he played trombone in high school, and we always thought it was funny and we ribbed him about it. He’s got mad at us a lotta times. He got so mad, where I just can’t believe that he’d kill somebody because if he’d of killed *them,* then he’d of killed us, ‘cause that’s how mad he got when we kidded him.”

Others noticed that Corll, as he approached thirty, became increasingly thin-skinned about his age, and deftly turned away questions about his early years, as though such revelations might give away a secret. “He wanted to be with younger people,” an acquaintance said, “and he wanted to pretend that he was just another kid, like us.”

He moved frequently, sometimes as often as five or six times a year, but almost always within a few minutes’ drive of The Heights. He jumped from single rooms to town houses to small efficiencies to garden apartments and finally to his father’s cottage in Pasadena, some twenty or twenty-five different addresses

over a fiveyear period. After his death, Mary West offered an explanation: “He moved because kids would follow him and he would just pick up and move, instead of fighting with ‘em. He’d get a smaller room where they didn’t have room for the kids. He always tried to avoid people without hurting their feelings.”

Others had a different theory. “Corll moved around so much because of constant parties and neighbor complaints,” a police report said. When bullet holes turned up in one of his apartment doors, it was replaced without question, and when he moved a few weeks later, a steel slab was found bolted to the inside of the panel. No one bothered to seek an explanation. Sometimes he paid up his rent and left a forwarding address, sometimes not. His credit rating, never triple-A, slumped sharply.

After he turned thirty, old friends noticed an abrupt personality change. Before then, he had had his quirks and idiosyncrasies, but always with an underlying humor and good spirit. “But then I’d see Dean and he’d be in a real bad mood toward me,” one friend remembered. “He’d just want certain people around him and that’s all.” The certain people included David Brooks and two or three other juvenile delinquents. “We’d go over to see him and he’d really be in a bad mood,” another old friend said, “and we’d take it that he didn’t want us around. That’s when I started thinking something was up. I’ve only seen him five or six times in the last few years because of that.” On one of those infrequent visits, Dean was “just gazing off like he was thinking about something,” too preoccupied even to offer a greeting. The first known victim of the mass murders was killed in September of 1970, when Corll was thirty; perhaps there was a connection between the murder and his startling change of mood. Letters to his mother, rare and semiliterate, afforded no clues except a hint of morosity, a suggestion that his life was not always a cabaret. At Christmastime, 1970, just before the Waldrop brothers were killed, he wrote:

I plan on taking an early vacation next year just to get it over with. This year I was sick one week and did nothing the other…. My job is a drag. Just nothing … to do. I don’t know where your will could be but I don’t have it I am sure. Dad has never said anything about the money. He is happy I thank with Mary [Arnold Corll’s third wife] … I sure hope the candy business works out good and feel sure it will. I don’t write very often, but it wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be.

The repetitiveness of his job, his mother said, was the subject of constant complaining. “He never did like it. It didn’t keep him busy.” His colleagues at the power station hardly knew him; he punched the time clock, tested his relays

and left as unobtrusively as he arrived. After his death, fellow workers were hard pressed to remember anything of significance: “He was a fairly stable-minded person….” “I knew him just to work with. Pretty nice fella.” “I never saw him get into fights, never saw him mad.” “I liked him. He was just one of the fellas you worked with.” He was vanilla.

Mary West did not see her son for the last five years of his life. “As far as I could tell, everything was okay,” she said. “Sometimes he called—he never liked to write—and the only time that he seemed disturbed was when he had a water pocket in his testicles, a hydrocele, I think they call it, about a year ago. He was real worried about it ‘cause he didn’t know how to pay the hospital bill.”

Betty Hawkins, who still saw her old boy friend every month or so, remembered that Corll was in constant pain from the hydrocele, “and he wasn’t the type to complain.” He told her that it had begun as a dull ache several months earlier. “He kept thinking it’d get better or go away,” the young divorcée recalled, “or that he was imagining things. It finally got so bad he had to have the operation.”

In the last year of his life, Corll seemed to confine his social activities to a single venue: The Heights, with its swarms of lower-and middle-class boys. To parents, he gave the universal impression of a clean-cut young man who loved children, a scoutmaster type, a church youth director. “He ate Easter dinner with us,” said Mrs. Wayne Henley, Sr. “He worked on my car. He loved to play with the kids.” She remembered him mainly as a man who “loved to be around kids and prattle with them about cars or fishing.” She noticed a single peculiarity: “He didn’t act like aman his age…. His eyes would flash when I joked about his age. He couldn’t take being kidded about that.” Mary Henley’s mother, Christine Weed, was of the same mind about the family’s frequent guest. “Dean talked like a sixteen-year-old kid,” the pleasant woman said. “He was a smart one. He seemed to love everything and everybody.”

When Arnold Corll bought a new home and Dean moved into the old bungalow in Pasadena in the spring of 1973, he quickly established an acceptable image in the classic suburban neighborhood with its tract houses and lawns of St. Augustine grass spotted with oleanders and chinaberry blossoms. He did not precisely fit in—“an occasional hippie type of individual would come to the house with long hair,” a neighbor observed disdainfully—but Corll himself wore his hair short, dressed conservatively, and was always polite and helpful. On weekends, neighbors noticed, he would usually leave on Saturday morning and come back Sunday night. So did most of the others in the highly mobile area. The newcomer was welcomed.

During the final months, Dean Corll kept in contact with Betty Hawkins, phoning her every few weeks. “This was unusual for him-up to then mostly I called *him*,” said the young woman. For the first time, Dean was drinking heavily, and his system had begun to show the effects. “Early in July,” Betty Hawkins said, “he told me on the phone that he drank a whole bottle of bourbon. I said, ‘Well, you know you have high blood pressure, Dean, and you’ve been complaining about stomach pain. Drinking’s the worst thing you can do!’

“He said, ‘Yeh, I know it.’ He sounded like he’d drunk quite a bit. And other times he’d say that he was feeling pretty good, that he’d drunk a lot. This was not the Dean I knew. The Dean I knew was always in complete control.”

Two weekends before his death, Corll drove Betty Hawkins and her young sons to his family’s retreat near Lake Sam Rayburn. “We rode in the van, and the kids sat in the back on that cushion he’d rigged up,” the woman recounted. “On the way we got to talking, and he said that he’d smoked marijuana once in a while, but I never saw him do it. He said that he knew some kids that sniffed glue and stuff like that, and he said, ‘That stuff’ll kill you. I can’t understand a kid even wanting to do something like that.’”

When they reached the cabin, Corll quickly downed three strong drinks of bourbon. “I’d *never* seen him do that before,” Betty said. “He was acting so different. He wouldn’t stay still. He wouldn’t sit. I was accustomed to seeing him relaxed and talking, playing with the kids, but he didn’t even pay any attention to them. He acted like a man with something on his mind.”

In the afternoon, Corll plopped on the couch and said, “Well, I been thinking about leaving my job.”

“Leaving your job?” the surprised woman said.

“Yeh. I been thinking about going to Colorado. You want to go with me?”

“Yes!” she answered quickly. “But why do you want to leave the light company? You make five dollars an hour. That’s good money.”

“Yeh, I make good money, but I don’t have anything to show for it.”

“Well, what’ll you do in Colorado?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll go back in the candy business.”

Later that Sunday, the restive man asked one of the Hawkins’ boys, “How would you like for me and Mama to get married and have y’all a little sister?” The offhand remark gave Betty a warm feeling; perhaps, after the indifferent fiveyear courtship, they would finally have their happy ending. But nothing more was said on the subject. En route to Houston in the white Ford van, Betty Hawkins

watched Dean closely, “and from the expressions on his face I knew something was bothering him, and I wanted to ask him so bad, but with him I’ve always figured if he wanted to tell me something, he’d tell me. He was the secretive kind of person that if he didn’t want to tell you something, he would go all around the question, and by the time he got through you didn’t even know what question you’d asked.” She ran out of cigarets and asked Dean to stop, but he kept passing up gasoline stations and stores and finally seemed to forget her request altogether. “That was so unlike him,” she said. “I knew there was something really wrong.”

On Sunday night, August 5, three days before his death, Corll called to chat. Betty said, “Well, I finally made up my mind to move out to my brother’s trailer.”

“How come are you gonna do that?” Corll asked.

“I don’t know. I just want out of this neighborhood.”

“Or be ready to go with me?” Dean asked suspiciously.

“Yeh,” the woman admitted.

“Well, I talked to Mom. She asked if you were coming, and I told her not right away.”

Betty’s heart sank. “What do you *mean?”* she blurted out.

“Well, it’s kinda scary with one person going up to Colorado, much less taking four,” Dean said. “And I don’t really have a job.”

The disappointed woman said, “If you don’t take me now, you won’t come back and get me!”

“I don’t know,” Corll answered in a noncommittal tone. “Right now I’m pretty lonesome.”

“When are you gonna leave?”

“Well, it isn’t right to do this to the light company, but what I’ll probably do is I get a check the last of the month, and when I get it I’ll probably leave and not go back to work the next morning. I don’t really like doing that. I should give them notice, but I can’t. Whenever I do leave, don’t tell David Brooks where I went.”

Betty wanted to ask for a fuller explanation, but she held her tongue. It was her last chance.

In Manitou Springs, Colorado, Mary West was becoming concerned about her son’s erratic behavior. He had called her on July 25, the day Charles Cobble and Marty Ray Jones disappeared, and when she asked how he was, he answered,

“I’m in trouble. I’m leaving here. I’m just gonna drop out of the picture.” While his mother gasped, he said, “I might even take an overdose.”

“Dean!” she exclaimed. “Are you on drugs?”

“No, but that would be a way out.”

“Well, Dean, you have to learn to live whether you do it in this life or another life,” said the woman whose religion stressed reincarnation. “And so you might as well just start now.”

“Mother, it might be easier to do in another life.”

Mrs. West started to ask what was wrong, but her son quickly cut her off. “I can’t talk about it!” he said.

She told him, “Well, come this way if you’re leaving Houston. Don’t go some other place. We haven’t seen you for a long time, and if you don’t want to stay here, you can go anyplace you want to go. But just come here first.”

Mother and son talked for a few more minutes, and then Mary West said, “Well, Dean, this is running your telephone bill up.”

“I’m not counting on paying it,” her son said.

“Well, you’re gonna have to have a phone sometimes.”

“I won’t get it under these recommendations.” His mother took this to mean that he was in debt.

A few days later, when she was in Denver making deliveries, she dispatched a package containing candy, a note, and a book, *Help for Today*, by Ernest Holmes. Her note told Dean, “There’s hope for everybody,” and suggested that he and Betty Hawkins peruse the book together.

A week later, on Sunday, August 5, the same weekend when thirteen-year-old James Dreymala vanished while riding his bike in Pasadena, Mrs. West telephoned her son, but there was no answer until seven in the evening. “Where’ve you been?” Mrs. West asked lightly. “I’ve been calling all day.”

“I’ve been dodging somebody,” Corll answered. Mary West thought he must be referring to a bill collector.

“Did you get the book?”

“Yes.”

“Well, read it!” his mother ordered, and the obedient son said he would. “When are you gonna get up here?” Mrs. West asked.

“About the first of September.”

“You gonna bring Betty with you?”

“I don’t think so, this time. With the two little boys and all …”

“Are you gonna tell your dad you’re leaving Houston?”

“I’ll let ‘em know.”

It was not until her son was dead that Mrs. West learned of certain other events of his last three days. He had finished talking to her on Sunday night, then called Betty Hawkins and told her that he would not be taking her to Colorado “right away,” and then telephoned the home of Arnold Corll in another part of Houston. Dean asked his father’s wife if she thought that someone would like to take over the Pasadena house.

“I don’t think so, Dean,” the woman had answered. “But why? Are you gonna leave?” Mrs. Corll, a co-worker at Houston Lightning & Power Company, knew that Dean had been upset lately; she had been doctoring him with stomach pills.

“I have to,” Dean answered, and refused to explain.

Mrs. Corll said, “Now, Dean, we’ve been real close. You know your daddy’s nervous. We can talk it over and work it out.”

“I can’t talk about it!” Corll repeated. “I’ll handle it.”

Later in the evening he drove to his father’s house and repaired a television set. No mention was made of the earlier conversation or his plans to leave the city.

On Monday morning, Mrs. Corll buzzed her stepson’s extension at work. “Well, Dean,” she said, “you had us worried to death. Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“No,” Corll said. “Everything’s under control.”

On the morning of Wednesday, August 8, she dialed him once again and was told that he had not shown up for work. She phoned the house in Pasadena. A man answered the telephone, and when the surprised woman identified herself, he said, “Lady, the only thing I can tell you is that you can’t talk to Dean because he’s dead.”

OF THE TWO YOUNG TRILBYS, languishing silently in protective confinement, there was even less to say than about the dead man. The boys of The Heights, like Wayne Henley, are unlikely to accumulate heroic case histories, nor are leftover boys like David Brooks. They are born, they go to school, they drop out, they get menial jobs, they reproduce others like themselves, and they die. Those who knew both the boys said that Brooks, lean and angular at six feet two, was dominant physically and morally. A confidential memo from a police reporter noted, “Of three, Brooks probably strongest personality…. Meaner than other

two, Brooks kept .38 revolver in possession, had said that if any policeman ever walked in on parties he would shoot him."

In his solitary cell, his belt and glasses taken against the possibility of suicide, Brooks seemed wan and forlorn, slumped on his bed, desultorily flipping the pages of a magazine while guards dropped in from other cellblocks to stare at him through the bars. When he was addressed, he jutted his head forward and lifted his sharp chin, as though hanging on every word, and smiled politely when a guard told him to "buck up." To a suggestion that he might be inherently "bright," Brooks mumbled something, then repeated louder, "I can't be *too* bright, or I wouldn't be in here," and smiled weakly.

He had returned to his native Houston in 1970 at the age of fifteen, after bouncing from Houston to Beaumont to rural Louisiana in the choppy wake of a disintegrating family situation. A country sheriff had recommended that the boy be sent back to his father; David had stolen a potbelly stove, a heinous offense in the docile parish, and the sheriff wanted to exile the evil presence. Alton Brooks waited for the son he hardly knew at the station in Houston, and barely recognized him in long blond locks. He hauled the boy off to a barbershop, and at the end of the first cutting, he instructed the barber to start over. "I want a *boy's* ha'rcut!" the rugged contractor demanded. The reunion was short-lived, and David went to live with his grandmother and then with the good dude, Dean Corll. As a younger child, he had been a B and C student, but at Hamilton Junior High in The Heights, where his best friend was Wayne Henley, he fell to D's and F's, and quit altogether at the age of fifteen. Dean Corll helped him buy a used Corvette, and the students who had looked down on him in school turned as green as the car. "It was nice!" one of them said. "I rode in it onct. He was a crazy driver! But he was kinda snotty, too, with his Vet and all."

To most of the boys, David Brooks remained a dimly perceived figure. "He just rode up and down in his car," one said. "He wasn't somebody we hung around with or *wanted* to hang around with. He wasn't all that nice. He didn't talk that much. You'd just see him driving around the neighborhood in his Vet."

Another teenager said beneath his breath, as though divulging the first word of an international scandal: "David didn't believe in God."

The boy who had stolen a stove in Louisiana continued to steal in Houston. He burglarized a pharmacy and shoplifted in supermarkets, and presumably played a role in the theft of the 1971 Camaro that was found stripped in the back of Dean Corll's rented shed. His marriage, at seventeen, baffled his outspoken father. "I don't understand thangs like that," Alton Brooks said. "How could he be foolin'

around with a man and then get a girl pregnant? It's the influence that Corll had over him. You can do a lot to a boy if you get control of him when he's ten years old."

A childhood girl friend tried to express the essence of the enigma called David Owen Brooks. "He always prided himself on not being able to have girls figure him out," she told a radio interviewer. "If he'd say something to me, I'd say, 'I know,' and he'd say, 'No, you *don't* know. You don't know me, you can't figure me out. *Nobody* can figure me out.'" It was a small point of honor in his narrow life, but the only one he had.

Wayne Henley, a child of a broken home like David Brooks and so many of the murder victims, at least enjoyed the advantage of living in a single neighborhood with a fixed set of family members for most of his life. His mother Mary was as faithful, to her son as the other Mary who was busy sending letters and granting interviews in Manitou Springs, Colorado. "Wayne's got a cold," Mary Henley complained as she departed from a visit to the jail, "and he hasn't even got anything to wipe his nose with. He hasn't got adequate clothes, he's not fed enough, and he's hungry, and I just want him taken care of, that's all." Jailers chortled, and the poor woman cried.

Along Twenty-seventh Street in The Heights, Mary Henley was known as a strict, righteous woman who worked hard for her four sons and tried to keep them out of trouble. "She was stricter with Wayne than most other parents," Henley's good friend Bruce Pittman said. And young Ricky Wilson added, "She was tough about us bringing anything into the house. Her and Wayne's grandmother, Miz Weed, they'd stand at the door, pattin' us down. 'You got anything on you?' She never would let anybody smoke grass in there. They musta patted me down a hundert times, and I don't even use the stuff."

Mrs. Henley was still too close to the memory of her ex-husband to allow her sons to dissipate in the home. Elmer Wayne Henley, Sr., had been a troublemaker and wife-beater when he was drunk and a rustic gentleman when he was sober. At the height of the family's domestic warfare, according to neighborhood legend, the father had stationed himself on the front porch with a pistol, waiting for his wife, and pegged a shot that nearly hit his son Wayne. Now he was safely remarried, but the police blotter still recorded his name from time to time.

The oldest son, Wayne, had been a superior student before the family discord, scoring four A's and two B's on a typical report card in the seventh grade. His IQ ranged between 110 and 120, and his test grades were consistently in the top

quarter of his class. But after the father left, Wayne accepted his role as man of the house, and simultaneously took on two parttime jobs to help support the family. His grades dropped fast, and he left school in the ninth grade. He was still admired at Hamilton by some who knew his unfortunate background. "Wayne came by to see me and asked me how his younger brothers were doing," a beaming school official said. "He had a good haircut, and he seemed much more mature than when he was a student."

For a while, the boy and his Bible were never parted, not even in public. At sixteen, he laid plans to join the Navy and send his mother an allotment. He went back and forth to the enlistment center for tests, and affixed a sticker to his grandmother's car: "SAILORS HAVE MORE FUN." When the Navy rejected him, a neighbor said, "It just knocked him over." Not long after, he was arrested for breaking and entering, and again for assault with a deadly weapon. He drank beer heavily and ran around with Dean Corll. "He'd give the impression of not being entirely with you," a friend recalled. "He was off away someplace in his head. Spaced out on beer maybe."

There were a few Heights boys who entertained conjecture about the sexual orientation of David Brooks, but no one doubted Wayne Henley's heterosexuality. "He had a lot of chicks," Bruce Pittman said. "He was almost engaged to one girl, and he must have had a crush on Rhonda Williams, 'cause he talked about her a lot. He messed around with too many chicks to be a homosexual."

"He'd always invite my daughter Mary," said a neighborhood mother. "He say, 'Mary, how 'bout goin' to the lake?' And Mary say, 'No.' And he'd start askin' me, 'Would you let her go, Mama?' I'd say, 'No, you take *me* and I'll go with you.' Now Mary says, 'Mother, it's good I didn't went with Wayne.'"

Close residents like the Hilligiests were flabbergasted when the case broke and Henley was arrested. "I knowed Wayne all his life," said an elderly woman, "and he always seemed like a good kid, and he never did believe in no murders or nothin' like that. He'd never even hurt a cat or a dog. I believe that if he had anythin' to do with the killin' he was under so much dope he didn't know what he was doin'."

Hers was the general view. All up and down Twenty-seventh Street, there was not a soul who would say that Elmer Wayne Henley, Jr., had ever believed in murder, until he became involved in several dozen of them.

*For a time there was a sign at the city limits: "NIGGER, GET YOUR ASS OUT OF TOWN BY SUNDOWN."

*Not his real name.

Beyond the Borderline

FOR A TIME, there was a new outspokenness against homosexuals, as though homosexuality were an early phase of the dread disorder that consumed Dean Corll, and an impending epidemic of sex crimes could only be forestalled by harassing young men who wore eye shadow and tight pants. A spokesman for Houston's extensive gay community pleaded for understanding before the city council. "That the person believed responsible was an alleged homosexual is only incidental," he read from a prepared statement. "It could just as easily have been the bodies of young girls that were unearthed." The young man posed a *reductio ad absurdum:* If the victims had been females, would there have been city-wide campaigning against heterosexuality? Slowly the wave of prejudice subsided, but not before it spread to Dallas, where police broke up an escort service that catered to homosexuals.*

The governor of Texas took official notice of the case in a public appeal to runaway teens to perform "a simple act of charity" by getting in touch with their parents, and broadcasters repeated the request at regular intervals. The police department was still being pestered by parents; a typical call came from a mother in Virginia who said her son had been traveling with a carnival and had dropped from sight when it reached Houston in May. She was convinced beyond doubt that Dean Corll had murdered her son, and telephoned daily to see if the body had been found.

The Vatican's daily *L'Osservatore Romano* discussed the case under an asterisk, symbol of Paul VI's personal interest. Headlined "ORRORE," the editorial warned that "we are in the domain of sadism and demonism. This is beyond the borderline of crime because it is beyond the borderline of reason. What wicked force can produce such a degradation—we were about to say dissolution—of man?" The newspaper characterized Dean Corll as infra-human. "One kills to the point of such cruel and inhuman aberrations because one is no longer a man, but an evil force. The two monsters—sex and drugs—have generated a new and different being—monstrous and demonic." Some interpreted the Vatican's statement as a logical follow-up to a speech in which the Pope had warned that moral corruption was placing the world under the "dominance of Satan."

Izvestia, voice of the Soviet government, pointed to the "indifference" and the "murderous bureaucracy" of the Houston police department. The city's people had become "alienated," the newspaper commented, and "the inaction of the

police is the most astounding aspect of this story."

Chief Herman Short took no public notice of the Vatican response, but he unleashed a characteristically forceful counterattack at *Izvestia*. "This is about the silliest thing I can think of," Short said, noting that he was not obliged by his job to satisfy the Soviets. "I wonder if they'd like to write a little story about the number of people the government has killed over there, taking their property and annihilating them. I don't believe we've had anything like that happen in Houston in the last several days."

The homicide division worked to tie up loose ends, but not every detective's heart was in the case. Said one of them, with scattershot accuracy, "These kids, most of them, knew what they were getting into. They were male whores out for some quick money." Another grumbled, "Those kids were what you call little turds, most of 'em. Several had police records. Several had nutty parents." The overstressed officers were using their favorite survival technique, making judgments about the social value of the dead, and gauging their work schedules accordingly. A Heights boy who had been interviewed just after the killings was quoted frequently. "Wayne Henley kept asking me if I could contact any boys that really wouldn't be missed too much," the teen-ager had said. "He wanted boys that their folks won't raise no fuss." Their prejudices confirmed by such statements, the investigators turned quickly to other matters. "Look," one plain-spoken detective said, "I got *live* cases to work on, where the murderer's at large right now, and might could kill again. Why should I fuck with this Corll thing?"

Ruby Jenkins, the candy-apple lady, brooded for days about Corll and his busy shovel, and finally told police what she knew. "They couldn't have been more bored," the woman said. "They sent a couple of detectives and a digging machine out to the shed on Twenty-second to meet me, and they found about forty reasons to tear up a few feet of dirt and then quit. There was concrete in most of the places were Dean used to dig, and a detective kept saying, 'Lady, this is old cement. There couldn't be any bodies under here. Lady, you're just plain wrong!' So I walked away. An NBC man came running up and said, 'Hey, they're not listening to you. May I interview you?' and I said, 'I have nothing else of importance.' I was so embarrassed! Just before I left, one of the detectives asked if there'd been anything between my ex-husband and Dean Corll. I was shocked! I couldn't believe my ears! In the first place, my ex-husband was about as straight and masculine as a man could be, about as queer as a one-dollar bill, and anyway what did that have to do with anything? But this detective, he kept insisting, 'Was your ex funny? I mean, was he *funny?'* I said, 'How do you mean, funny? Had a sense of humor?' He said, 'No, was he

queer?' I said, 'Well, I never saw any queer tendencies about him. Of course, I'm not an authority on queers,' and I drove off."

Officers working the street were plainly taking their cue from superiors back at headquarters. "1 don't know if we found all the bodies or not," the droll Breckenridge Porter said. "Probably not. Probably won't *ever*. What difference does it make? Other'n it may be some satisfaction to the parents of missin' kids, where they been missin' for three, four years." Thousands of Houston youngsters were missing and completely out of touch with parents and/or friends, and many of them came from The Heights and its environs.

"There's other bodies somewhere," said Lieutenant Porter thoughtfully. "I have no idee where, and we'll never know. I cain't even prove it, but it's my opinion. We could be diggin' for the next two years if we had enough men. But then we wouldn't be keepin' up with the homicides that are goin' on now. The only reason we can say the case goes back three years is Henley and Brooks have been in it for three years, but perhaps back prior to three years maybe there was another Henley or Brooks? And now they're dead? They're now where Henley and Brooks woulda wound up, and almost *did.* We'll never know."

Charles Melder, Henley's lawyer, echoed Porter in a chilling aside to newsmen. "Corll himself might have killed, far as I know, two hundred or three hundred or four hundred boys, you see?"

Students of the case recalled Brooks's statement that Dean Corll had once "hung around" with Mark Scott and Ruben Watson, both of whom had juvenile records and both of whom had been murdered. Was it possible that Corll had used such boys as accomplices, then destroyed them to break the chain of evidence, and later laid the same plans for Henley and Brooks? If so, the slaughter could have continued far into the future, just as it might have reached far backward in time. As Breckenridge Porter emphasized, "No one will ever know," especially with the homicide division showing only a feeble interest. A county grand jury took official notice that the police investigation lacked "professional imagination, thoroughness and professional coordination."

Chief Short shot back: "Silly!"

In The Heights, the panic lasted a few weeks. "The children are scairt to git out at night," an overwrought father complained. "They're spooked! They don't know who to trust, they don't know who to speak to. The park out there has been empty the last three or four nights. The city turns the lights on, but they won't use it now."

Sheila Hines spoke for the children who lived around Twenty-seventh Street.

“Everyone’s pretty scairt, ya know? A lot of the dudes are worried, ’cause like if ya couldn’t trust Wayne, who could ya trust? We knew Wayne all our lives.”

“My child woulda got into that van, *any* child woulda got in,” said a frightened mother. “If they were walking down the street and a kid came by that they went to school with and had known all their lives, why of course they’d have gone with ’em! That is the greatest tragedy about this: the fact that you can’t trust the people you know, and you can’t even trust the children that your children are running around with.”

If there were any deeper social insights to be gained from the case, they seemed to go unnoticed in the old neighborhood. “Here was a perfect proof that law and order doesn’t consist of beating up blacks and clubbing winos and chasing kids for smoking grass,” said TV commentator Mickey Herskowitz, “but I’m afraid the message passed right by The Heights. Instead of talking about genuine law and order, they’re calling for more and more of what they’ve had.”

A mass meeting was held in a Baptist church, under the watchword “Did They Die in Vain?” But the small auditorium was only a fourth full, and the frustrated audience soon retreated to the positions that had sustained The Heights historically: anger and defensiveness. The organizer, a fiery truck driver with the style of an evangelist, denounced the city council, outsiders, the press and television (“They give the people the idea that the people in The Heights are white trash, we raise punks, we don’t keer for our children!”), and lauded Chief Short and the Houston police department. The meeting soon began to sound like a pep rally: “We’re a-gonna clean up this neighborhood!” “We have to get together!” “WE’RE GONNA MAKE IT SAFE!” Almost nothing was said about methods.

Several members of the audience arose to excoriate homosexuals, pronounced “hommasexhuls.” A sweaty little man in a gray undershirt, throwing an odor that would flatten a horse, suggested that the social problems of The Heights would never be solved until the neighborhood purged itself of “suspicious” characters. There were cries of “Yea” and “Amen.” At this unpropitious moment, an effeminate visitor from out of town made an eloquent appeal for reason. “Corll wasn’t suspicious-looking,” he said. “Henley and Brooks weren’t suspicious-looking. Maybe you’re wasting time trying to figure out who’s suspicious.” There were shocked whispers. To most of the audience, the sight was beyond belief: a real live hommasexhul filling the house of God with sibilant *s*’s while his young black-haired friend, obviously another one of “them,” beamed in admiration. When the visitor finished his statement, the moderator gulped a fast “Thank you” and called on someone else.

After a comment about the need to assist the problem children of the neighborhood, Mrs. Fred Hilligiest raised her hand for permission to speak. Uncertain of the protocol, the crowd gave her a courteous round of applause. “I’d just like to say that nothing that’s been said here has anything to do with me,” she began softly. She climbed heavily to her feet and clamped both hands on the back of the pew in front, as though to brace herself, and spoke through tears in a voice on the edge of breaking. “My child is not a runaway,” she said, at first refusing to speak of David in the past tense. “He’s not a bad boy. He went out walking to the swimming pool and he was killed. We haven’t talked about that. We haven’t talked about innocence. We might as well give up hope if we can’t let our chil’ren have the beauty they were meant to have.” She stopped to compose herself, but her voice faded away in sobs. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’ve just had this emotion stored up in me so long, I just….” She sat down, and her husband slipped his arm about her shoulders.

A short, chubby man marched down the aisle and laid an ax, a rifle, a pistol and two tear-gas canisters next to the lectern, then walked back a few rows and took a seat on the aisle. An off-duty policeman, Lieutenant Joe Skipper, moved into an adjoining seat and identified himself. As another speaker began to talk, the newcomer lunged toward the stack of weapons, and Skipper wrestled him to the floor with help from a few others. A man with a highpitched voice raced to the microphone and screamed, “That’s what we’re trying to stop! *That’s what we’re trying to get off our streets!”*

The intruder, biting hard on his protruding tongue, was rushed down the aisle. As he passed Dorothy Hilligiest, he said, “I came here with good intentions, ma’am. I just wanted to make a point. Be prepared, little lady. That’s my point. You can’t never be too careful. You’re got to be prepared.” He told police he just wanted to show how easy it is to kill children. The weapons had not been loaded.

“God was with us,” a preacher told the stunned audience in reverent tones, while two little cousins of the dead Baulch brothers sat in the front row and wailed with fright.

The zealot who had opened the meeting announced in a voice quivering with rage and emotion, “Folks, I wanta tell you sumpin’. *This* is what we’re gonna rid these streets of…. We just begun to fight! I don’t wantcha to be skeered, but we just begun! I’m whoppin’ mad! WE’RE GONNA MAKE THIS A SAFE PLACE TO LIVE!”

The meeting was closed with a benediction.

BETTY COBBLE, THE RED-HAIRED mother of one of the last murder victims, went right back to her job delivering flowers. “I felt like if I were to give in to my feelings, I wouldn’t be able to get hold of myself again,” the wispy woman explained. She delivered wreaths for Ruben Watson and James Glass, two of the dead boys, “but I didn’t tell anybody who I was. I just brought the flowers in and did my job. I was glad I didn’t have to deliver any for Charles.”

The Cobbles held no services for their son; the remains of the lanky, shy boy were cremated and brought home. Betty had remembered a melancholy remark Charles had made as a child: “He said he wanted to be cremated and his ashes put in a pirates’ chest lined with blue velvet.” At a nearby tobacco shop, Vern Cobble found a handsome humidor, hand-tooled in Italy and covered in leather, and Betty looked all over town for the right shade of blue velvet and finally ordered it from Fort Worth.

In the first two weeks after the bodies were found, the upset mother lost six of her hundred-odd pounds, and the physician who treated her for chronic headache ordered her to slow down. “I seem to get tired faster,” the busy woman admitted. “My job isn’t hard, but I get out of breath. I have to deliver to hospital rooms and sometimes I get awfully tired.” She tried to discuss the loss as infrequently as possible, but the fascinated employees of the flower shop worried the subject like a hangnail. “I love the woman that runs the plice,” Mrs. Cobble said. “She’s just a real sweet elderly person, but she asked me, ‘It may be morbid, but have they found the boys’ clothes?’ I said very sternly, ‘Now listen, if you’d watched television, you’d have seen ’em dig up the bodies, and you could have *told* that those boys were completely nekkid. Now you *know* what kind of person had a hold of ’em, so please, let’s stop talkin’ about it.’ I tried to be as blunt with her as I could.” But the questioning persisted, and Betty Cobble was forced to quit.

The taciturn postal supervisor Vern Cobble attempted his wife’s technique of plunging back into work, but he found that his professional concentration had been shattered. “Almost every night I had to take off early, and pretty soon I was just working an hour or two and leaving, too nervous, too upset,” Cobble said. For a while, he stayed home and tinkered with an old Mustang that he had bought for Charles. “I took the transmission and the clutch and everything else out of that thing twice and put it all back, just to have something to do,” he said, “but it wouldn’t help me clear my mind. I had thoughts of self-recrimination for the things I didn’t do for my son. I’d always had two or three jobs, and I didn’t have enough time to spend with him. Now I know you should spend as much time as you can with your boy, even at the expense of your job, your business, even if you have to let him go a little hungry, or you don’t have nice furniture.

You can sit on an apple crate, but you can't get a son back."

A few weeks went by, and Vern Cobble found his mood worsening. "I felt like I was on the verge of going all to pieces," he said. "I been holding it in and holding it in and holding it in for so long. I'm lucky that I don't dream, but I kept hearing his voice, the telephone conversation all over again, Charles telling me he had to have a thousand dollars and sounding so upset and all."

One day the disturbed man jumped into his car and began driving. He sped north for sixty miles, then turned around and headed for Mexico. "I stopped in Matamoros, and I walked around. I didn't know anybody there, and they didn't speak English and I didn't speak Spanish, so I could just walk and think and reflect. Gradually I began to feel better. I drove about a thousand miles in three days before I came home, and I managed to think the whole thing through. I just came to the realization that Charles was a very, very sensitive boy, and nobody could be expected to understand him all the time. I read a phrase somewhere about the sound of a different drummer, and it reminded me of Charles. He was tuned into a different generation that I couldn't understand. And I decided there wasn't anything I could have done about what happened, and I'd just have to pick up and go on."

He returned to work the next evening.

Horace "Jimmy" Lawrence sat in his empty house with the roaches running along the baseboards. All the furniture was gone from the little cottage just north of The Heights. "I'm fixing to move," Jimmy explained. "I don't wanta be around this place no more." He poked at his eyes with a handkerchief. "I keep going," he said. "I put my trust in the Lard. Life has to go on. Billy wouldn't want me to give up." His other son telephoned, and the father began and ended the conversation with the same words, "Son, I love you."

The dead boy's room was undisturbed. "I wanta keep it that way till the last minute," his father said. He picked through memorabilia: the boy's football awards and plaques; Boy Scout merit badges for music, health, art and lifesaving; a large picture of Brigitte Bardot. He opened the drawers of a battered maple dresser to reveal an empty can of shoe polish, a silver charm bracelet, a few spent shotgun shells, two empty beer cans and a wine bottle, a *Reader's Digest* and a small effigy of Christ on the Cross. "That's all Billy had to his name," Jimmy Lawrence said. "I wisht I coulda done him better."

The reformed holdup man and newspaper mailer said he felt no malice toward the two young men in jail. "It's not my place to pass judgment," he explained. "Only God has that right. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lard.' After Billy's

funeral, I went on down to see Miz Henley. I wanted her to know I didn't have any animosity toward her or the boys. I felt so sorry for her! I told her if they was anythang I could do to ease her burden, to feel free to call upon me, and I meant it from the bottom of my heart. Miz Henley's mother, she broke down and cried right in front of me."

Jimmy Lawrence smiled. "Then a funny thang happened," he said. "I was driving through Pasadena and a policeman blew his sireen and pulled me over. He said, 'Your sticker's expired.'

"I said, 'I've had so many problems the last few weeks I plumb forgot about that sticker.'

"He said, 'Your name sounds awful familiar.'

"I said, 'Well, I guess so! I been on television and radio and the newspapers for the last few weeks. My God, man, where in the world you been? My son was one of those that was murdered!' "He said, 'Yeh, I hear sumpin' like that every day,' and kep' on writing the ticket. When he left I shook hands with him and told him I was gonna pray for him that night. I did pray for him. There's pricks in every business."

Billy Gene Baulch, the ex-cowboy truck driver, sat in the dim parlor of his old bungalow on Sixteenth Street and cradled his infant son in his arms. "Ain't *nobody* gonna git this'n!" said the man who had lost two sons to murder and another to an automobile accident. "We're gonna keep a guard posted twenty-four hours."

His wife, Janey, took the baby and began feeding him, and Baulch told how he had been called to the coroner's office to assist in the identifications of his sons Billy and Tony. "Bones," he said. "That's all they was. It's hail to see your sons bone by bone."

For several days, Baulch had been asking police to dig around the side and back of the shed down the street where Dean Corll had lived five years earlier. "Cops kep' sayin' they'd be somebody out there to do it, but they never was, so I jes' give up on 'em. I never asked a whole lot outa the police. Hail far, cain't they help? It won't help me, but it might help the rest of the people in this neighborhood, the people with missin' sons. But the police—they jes' don't seem too interested."

Three blocks away, Gerald Oncale was seething over an experience at police headquarters. "I carried pictures of Johnny up there a couple days after it all come out," the rotund house mover said, "and I aksed this detective to show 'em to David Brooks. The detective made me sit down, didn't search me or nothing,

and when I seen 'em take Brooks by the next door there, I coulda shot him if I'd had a gun. Anyway, this detective showed the pictures and he come back out and he told me, 'Yeh, he says they killed this punk, too.' I guess he didn't know I was the father."

Weeks went by before the final remains of Oncale's stepson Johnny Delome were identified to the medical examiner's satisfaction. When word came, Gerald was in the process of jacking down a house that he had moved, and "it had to be on the ground for me to get the money, and if I didn't have the money, Johnny didn't get buried." He worked on the house till 9 P.M., then drove all night with his wife, Eunice, to Crowley, Louisiana, where the family traditionally buried its dead. "My granddaddy willed a plot to the whole family," Mrs. Oncale explained. "He said we're all so poor, if we don't have someplace of our own we won't have anyplace to be laid away, so he left us two acres. It's real nice out there in the country, fresh breeze and all."

Still without sleep, Gerald Oncale rushed to the funeral home in Crowley. "I wanna see his body," the burly man said.

"Why?" a funeral director asked.

"I don't think it's my boy. Now if I could see the hair, even though it changed color, I could visualize what his head looked like, and if I could see his teeth, it would satisfy me whether it was Johnny."

The mortician pulled out a three-foot plastic sack that had been shipped the previous day from Houston. He told Oncale, "Let me open it and see what condition he's in. I never did open it; I just took their word that there's a body in there. I wouldn't want you to see something you're not in shape to see." A few minutes later, the funeral director told the determined stepfather, "You can come in and look."

Gerald Oncale entered the embalming room and gasped. "There was just bones scattered around," he said later. "The jawbone was cut off right under the nose. No jawbone. No hair. There was a little bullet hole right in the forehead. *No* hair and *no* jawbone! No teeth at all."

He said nothing through the services and the burial ("for my wife's sake"), and then hurried back home to earn money to continue the search for Johnny Delome. "I'll never stop," the big man said, "and ain't nobody gonna stop me, either. That decrepit buncha bones was *not* my boy. My boy's woiking someplace and he's alive and well and I'm gonna find him or he's gonna come back home, *one*. Lemme tell yeh: I dreamed about Johnny, and that means something. His mother was sitting in my pickup truck, and Johnny come from

behind a building. I said, ‘Johnny, what do you want?’ Eunice got out of the truck and hugged him and she said, ‘Won’t you come home?’ and Johnny said, ‘Well, I’ll come home if you promise not to beat hell outa me.’ That was the end. And that dream means we’ll be seeing Johnny soon.”

On Twenty-sixth Street, in the bungalow she had paneled for her two fatherless sons, Geraldine Winkle had also been dreaming. “One dream I was trying to catch Malley,” she said. “I was running with all my might, almost got to him a few times, almost grabbed him, and he kept going further. One time he turned to me in a dream and he said, ‘Mother, I just wisht you’d leave me alone. I have my own life to lead.’ That broke my heart! But I felt better when I woke up, ’cause I know what kind of son I raised, and he’s got to be in heaven.”

One of Mrs. Winkle’s sisters came down from Illinois after Malley’s death was confirmed, and the two sat up till late at night sipping drinks and talking over old times and trying to adjust to the finality of the loss. One morning the sister was awakened before dawn by screams. “They’re digging in the front yard!” Gerry Winkle cried in her sleep. “THEY’RE DIGGING IN THE FRONT YARD!” The sister took the frightened woman in her arms and held her till she stopped shaking.

Fred and Dorothy Hilligiest thought they had listened to every one of their son David’s homemade tape recordings, seeking clues to his disappearance, but one day they found an unmarked cassette with Bobby Vinton singing “If I Had My Life to Live Over,” and David singing along in the background and brushing lightly on his drums. “It sounded so cute,” Mrs. Hilligiest said. “He’d sing in that little adolescent voice with the break in it, and then he’d make a sound like Donald Duck, and at the end he said, ‘That’s me, all right!’ He was always joking around.” The family played the tape again and again.

The bodies of David Hilligiest and Gregory Malley Winkle had been sent accidentally to Atlanta, Georgia, where they were buried as Jerry and Donald Waldrop, and it was several weeks before the error was discovered. “The medical examiner had a mighty tough job sorting those boys out,” Fred Hilligiest said understandingly. “You can excuse a mistake or two.”

Dorothy held onto the control that had helped the family through the long ordeal. “I’m not angry with anybody and I never have been,” she said in the voice that had developed a permanent tremolo with the loss of her son. “I put myself in Miz Henley’s place, because I’ve had six children myself, and I know that she’s bearing a bigger cross than I am. Her son’s life is ruin’t. I don’t think it’ll ever mend. I don’t blame Miz Henley, and I don’t blame anybody else. I think that for

too long we've all been blaming each other, when it's the times we live in that's to blame."

Like their parents, the Hilligiest children had refused to entertain any thought that David was gone forever until the proof became irrefutable. "They *always* thought of him as coming back," Mrs. Hilligiest said. "They'd even talk about it: 'We'll do this and that when David comes back.' I told Stanley, the youngest one, the other night, after everybody left and the house quieted down, it was bedtime, and he came to the bed crying and shaking and he said, 'I just don't know what I'm gonna do. David is not coming back, and I can't quit thinking about him.' So I got up and I went with him and sat in the middle of the bed between the two of 'em and tried to give 'em courage. I said, 'Well, just say a prayer. God'll give you strength, I know. Put yourself in Wayne's two little brothers' place. Look at what their brother has done. And your brother, he's not suffering. Sometimes these things have to happen to help other people. Out of every evil comes some good. Time will heal for us. We'll never forget David, and we'll always have good memories of him.'"

Mary West sat in her simple apartment over the gift shop in Manitou Springs and slowly composed a reminiscence about her son Dean Corll. "We do not say that there is no evil experience," she wrote, paraphrasing the teachings of her faith, the Church of Religious Science. "Evil is not an entity, but the misuse of a power which in itself is good. We shall never know the nature of good by dissecting the nature of evil." She concentrated for a few minutes, then added some thoughts of her own.

"The police, the news reporters, the TV reporters, the psychiatrists are trying so hard to convince the whole world that Dean Corll was a homosexual sadistic murderer…. Dean Corll was good, not a goody-good that hides behind a title, a church or a philosophy. He was *basically* good. He never spread rumors, he made up no lies. He did not choose his friends; his friends chose him.

"He moved, the paper quotes, ten times in one year; I'm inclined to think it was a two—or three-year period. However, when the boys started bugging"—she scratched out "bugging" and substituted "getting to him"—"he moved on. They did not mind his moving; they always found him, and the boat shed was always at their disposal. The police found no bodies in any place where he lived or worked, try as they may. Did they tell the reporters that they found a dead dog that Dean dearly loved buried in his backyard in Pasadena? Did they put the dog back where Dean had buried him? What *did* they do? Or does it matter….?

"A very dear friend told me the other day that a lady in Houston told her that she

recognized Dean from an unretouched picture in the paper as a young man who stopped on the street to lend her a hand with her stalled car. She said she thought it was only out of gas. The young man in the white van got the gas and told her if that didn't fix it he'd help her. This young man before his death was as the TV said a nobody, moved about unnoticed by most people. Some of the world will remember his white van pulling out cars that were high-centered in the sand on Galveston Beach, helping people move, or even giving shelter for the runaway kids. Dean was not a sex maniac, he'd simply seen too many broken hearts, broken homes and did not want the responsibility of marriage….

"Without trial, with no heed to the people who really knew Dean, he has to go down in history as a sadistic murderer. I never heard Dean use the Lord's name in vain, or anyone who knew Dean never heard him curse our Lord. He let people do as they wanted to—"

She stopped. The memoirs would be finished later. She telephoned the Houston number of a psychiatrist who had been widely quoted about the murders, and for fifteen minutes she berated the man for publicly comparing her son to various sex murderers of history. "You want to compare Dean with somebody!" she scolded. "Get this: in three hours and fifteen minutes he woulda been a Christmas baby. He lived to be thirty-three years old. His mother's name was Mary, and he was a bachelor electrician. He loved kids, and when they got on his nerves, he moved on. He was gentle, he would never cut his mother down, never, never talk back to anybody, and he let everybody do as they pleased. And he was crucified in the newspapers!"

No psychiatrist or journalist or district attorney would change the mind of Dean Corll's mother. She had her own insights, her own reference points, even her own sources of information. A clairvoyant who worked as a matron at the jail over in Colorado Springs told her, "I see Dean. He's completely clear. He's robed in white. He has an aura of white around him." Mary West could see the truth, as clear as the nimbus surrounding her son. Like the twice-buried boys of the eddy called The Heights, the man with the candy had gone through the veil to another life. She hoped it was a better one.

*The Houston *Chronicle* headlined: "DALLAS POLICE PROBE HOMOSEXUAL CALL-BOYS."